

支倉凍砂

イラスト 鍋島テツヒロ

ILLUSTRATION: TETSUHIRO NABESHIMA
SUNNY HASEKURA

マグダラで眠れ

MAY YOUR SOUL REST IN

MAGDALA.



電撃文庫

Prologue

The candlelight flickered as he opened his eyes.

An icy wind agitated his eyeballs in the midst of this chilly night.

The pattering of footsteps on stairs from afar could be heard. It was most likely time for the guards to change shifts.

"How's the inside?"

A voice could vaguely be heard through the gaps of the iron bar door.

The sound of chainmail rattling could also be heard.

"He's quiet..."

He sensed stares from the other side of the door, all looking his way together in the secretive exchange.

They lacked the courage to look through the gaps of the iron bars directly.

"Is he asleep?"

"Who knows? ...But I heard that he can't sleep..."

"I think his name is Kusla (Interest) ."

"Kusla...such a vile name. I think two of my good friends were ruined by debt."

The guards of a prison were meant to bring terror to its convicts.

In the sense of being restrained behind iron bars, however, a convict was no different from the guards. Nothing but whichever side of the bars they were kept behind could distinguish between them.



"What crime has he committed?"

"I think...it was blasphemy against God. Yes, that. He stole a saint's bones and consumed them or something..."

And now I'm being treated as a monster, Kusla noted wryly. The thought invited his devious streak.

He had been imprisoned for approximately two weeks, and counting the stars gleaming through metal bars from his window grew boring.

"Hey!"

Kusla called out from within his cell.

Inside, it was reminiscent of grassland - filled with autumn insects chirping as they flew about the containment's shadowy corners.

This vibrant life all around Kusla came to a halt the moment he spoke.

To Kusla, the only thing that didn't seem to stop were the gusts of frost, mercilessly expanding the weather's icy touch.

"Let's chat."

He wanted to stand, but his cold and exhausted body was tremendously stiff. This man, Kusla, was feared by all; though he was really no different from anyone else. His height was slightly above-average, but his physique was unremarkable. He considered himself to have a fearless complexion, but he had never been called a handsome man. In a crowd, it was very likely that no one would recognize him. He was once knocked down by a carriage, and his broken wrist never repaired itself properly due to negligence, granting him a singly distinct feature.

Given his very pedestrian composition, the past two weeks of prison life would naturally cause Kusla's body to weaken. Kusla felt the pain on his joints and a slight dizziness as he endeavored to stand.

The guards on the other side of the cell door were unaware this, however.

Kusla dragged the frozen-cold shackle and ball fettered at his ankles as he staggered toward the prison door, bringing his face to its iron bars.

"Let's talk."

The light brought pain to his eyes, causing him to narrow them slightly, but this evidently made his expression heinous. The two guards on the other side of the bars stood in place without replying, like hares would crossing paths with a hunter.

"Relax, this won't be bad for you."

Kusla tried smiling, but quickly discarded the thought as he realized it could only frighten them in the current situation.

"I just have something I want to ask of you..."

The requests made by people in prison were mostly the same, whether it was a request for warmth, a request for food, a permit to write letters, or a plea for sooner death.

The two guards fell back in surprise, even though they were very accustomed to hearing this appeal from prisoners.

They looked at one another, and the eldest spoke.

"Wha-what kind of request?"

"Hmn. It's very simple."

Kusla answered as he pointed through a gap in the bars.

"Could you use that key to open this door?"

Badum. A sound seemingly rang out as the two guards' jaws dropped.

It was already past midnight. This was the devil's time - a time in which all members of priesthood were fast asleep.

The guards, hastily recovering themselves from alarm, recoiled and raised their spears.

"Y-you fool! It's *impossible* for us to do that!"

"Of course, you wouldn't be doing this without repayment."

The guards had to endure the cold of the night just as the prisoners in order to keep sentry; theirs was a tasking duty. Still, people had good reason to flock for a guard's open post, as it was not only the pay that brought them in, but also the hope of receiving bribes.

Eying each other for an answer, the two guards unwittingly revealed that they were both overwhelmed with tension.

It was true, though, that two people together could summon greater courage than they might separately.

This time, the youngest spoke.

"Yo-you've already been granted the *death penalty* by The Church, and you're no different from a dead man now. So...why should we agree to your deal? If it's a plead you have, we can listen. Know your place here!"

"Fine, just open this door as usual and strip everything from me."

If the guards could.

It wasn't uncommon to see people incarcerated for stealing bread - their standing ripped away from them, abandoned in the harsh cold to die. This was a prison, a dreaded place.

Despite the immense dread and fear associated with prisons and their captives, though, it was those captives taken to prisons not at all visible to the public who were most terrifying.

Prisons were often built in the shape of a spire, in a place far away from people, yet at the one place they could be spotted most clearly by denizens of the captor's civilization: from the arching bridge made over a river passing through the city's center.

The two men were speechless. If they were fooled by the cunning of a prisoner, their pride as guards would be at stake.

"Ev-everything from a man convicted by The Church belongs to The Church, whether it's clothes, inheritance or life...that's why we can't take them."

They did not dare to enter such a terrifying cell, but they still had to protect their dignity as guards.

This reason that they vouched for not opening the door was reasonable enough.

Yet Kusla merely shrugged as he rummaged through the inside of his shirt, artfully neglecting their excuses as he said, "Hey, didn't I say that I won't let you do this for nothing? Let me show you something good."

"...So-something good?"

"Right. Haven't you encountered one or two things that infuriate you at work?"

"..."

Appearing drunk, the guards struggled to understand their detainee's words. In their affected state they could see two shadows dance before them as they frowned into the prison cell.

"Consider your superiors and colleagues."

"Su...perior?"

"Yes, your superiors. Those incompetent braggarts can flaunt with heads held high because of their well-to-do families. In this city, there are those in the Luts family, the Barrows family, and the Judith family - all of them, high and mighty with their large swords hilted to the side as they gallop around on their horses in a showy display, drinking their ales while seated at the fireplace, and resting on none other than lambskin bed! In the day, they'll casually come around and take away what little money you managed earning from the convicts the night prior, and your only right is indignation. In this light, I don't know who the prisoners really are."

The duo traded glances once more.

This time, however, they also gulped in unison.

"...What's this...good thing?"

Baited.

Kusla grinned. His devious smile tempted the pair of guards further.

"This little thing."

Kusla unveiled a small bottle from his palm, shaking it from behind the iron bars.

The guards' eyes pursued it like a kitten to yarn.

"Just slip a small amount of its contents into the food of the one you hate."

Instantly, their faces grew full of discomfort.

Neither of the guards looked at the other directly, but their eyes diverted instead.

"Hey, don't tell me this is..."

Kusla felt he could hear their true thoughts in the guard's tone.

There were very few people given the ominous title of 'Interest', the death penalty by The Church, and left to suffer in a prison cell. To Kusla, there was ample reason to await seeing the guards embrace darkness.

Both of them stepped forward in unison.

"What, exactly, is... inside?"

"Arsenic."

"Arsenic?"

"It is refined from the finest Realgar. In the past, a fellow who used to work with me licked it out of his unrestrained curiosity."

"Lick-- licked it?"

"Yeah. People like us are hopeless idiots. We have to try such things when we have the opportunity - it's like an addiction. So, that fool who licked it..."

"What happened? To the fool?"

Kusla feigned indifference in his answer.

"Nothing happened."

"...Huh?"

The guards both cried out in the instant of excited furor over being tricked.

"But the next morning, when I walked into that guy's room; I found his skin all rotten, his face charred black, his hands shriveled, and he looked like a burnt corpse. It really shocked me. The myths behind the ancient King of Aeolus' assassination were actually true, and this was the cause."

Kusla shook the bottle again.

"The good thing about this Arsenic is that a person won't die upon consuming it. There's a time interval before it takes effect, which means you won't be suspected. The corpse will be really ugly - that person will look like he's been abandoned by God, and people will think that their death was divine retribution. Nobody will actually think that the powder in this little bottle killed them, right?"

Kusla's smile widened, listening as his potential clients wore serious expressions.

"Can you please open the door if I exchange this powder?"

It was midnight, the sun had long set, and even the servants of God were not around, so there was no one left to keep watch other than the guards. Both of them stared at Kusla, almost haunted by him. In this rotten world, there was no one left who would not want to kill at least one or two of their sworn enemies.

"..."

The two guards had beads of cold sweat dripping in the midst of chilled air, their bodies rigid.

However, their eyes exposed that they were trying to forgive each other of their sins.

Kusla chuckled to the clattering of keys on the guard's waist.

Their lives were a black nightmare. This was enough to tempt action for each of their parts.

Nothing was wrong in what they were doing.

If there were anyone to blame, it would be God for creating an 'opposite'.

"Ar-are you serious...?"

The man with the chain of keys on his waist spoke with a hoarse voice.

A hand reached for the keys at once, causing him to lose his balance.

Kusla's grin brimmed to the corners of his mouth as God's righteous thunder roared.

"What is it you two are doing!?"

If such divine strikes could kill a man, this was at least very much similar.

The guards were startled, tumbling clumsily as they were probably trying to turn and face the voice at attention.

Collapsing onto the floor, they lifted their heads and looked up in the direction of the person speaking, and at that moment felt firmly that they were the real prisoners.

The one who spoke was the warden, holding authority over the prison - a high-ranking knight dressed in glamorous clothing, with a white beard that would show many glistening hairs in the daylight.

"I should have emphasized that you are not to talk with this man. If you talk with him, you will create a severe danger. Those who act outside the law will be deemed as heretics, and will be unable to stand before God!"

"!...!..."

The two guards nearly forgot their instincts to breathe as they felt a heavy strain on both body and mind all at once. The aged knight heedlessly approached Kusla's cell. Behind the old knight Kusla could identify two more figures, themselves young knights following the other's command. One could learn with a single glance that they were well-trained; a skillful unit vastly different from the rattled watchmen.

The band of newcomers wore metal helmets fully encasing their faces. Their armor was probably to resist anything Kusla might try - namely, his rumored 'magic'.

"You sure came late." Kusla's pupils still focused to the light filtering through the bars of his cell door.

"The verdict's out."

"A burning at the stake?"

The warden jeered in reply, "Don't tell me you're starting to worry about your life now of all times?"

Kusla shrugged, taking a few steps back from the door.

One of the knights forcefully snatched the keys from a collapsed guard, each one rattling on the ring.

"Come out, Kusla."

The cell door opened in a low moan.

"The Restless Alchemist."

Act 1

There existed a group of people known as alchemists.

To nearly all, they were of the same nature as demons and witches.

It was nighttime - a time for the inhospitable winter weather to intensify. Any vegetation would seemingly hibernate, with branches waning under the weight of snow, whole limbs stripped of their colorful foliage.

Kusla was dragged from his arms by the knights in metal headpiece out of his cell. He considered his appearance in this abominable state, and felt that the opinions people had of him were not all too ridiculous after all.

The small window guardsmen would use for a view of the outdoors from inside the tower was unsealed. Glistening above the landscape were many stars which seemed so delicate that the buffeting winds outside would sweep them away.

"You couldn't see the stars from your cell window?"

Looking over his shoulder to speak, the aged knight leading the pack noticed Kusla slowing his pace. In his right hand was a candle holder, while the left rested on his hilt, ready for anything unexpected.

Noticing the ring wore on the knight's little finger, Kusla could only help but quell his urge to grin.

"I could, but it's different when thinking the stars symbolize my freedom."

Raising his eyebrows in unspoken surprise, the knight turned to continue onward. Kusla was again lurched by the guards flanking him, yet he chuckled with another look at the ring on the old knight's hand.

There was a deep blue sapphire mounted on the ring. It was a gemstone that claimed superstitions of granting wisdom and calm to those who wore it, with the added ability of discerning traps. If pure silver was a metal used to counter evil gods in the form a sword, sapphire served like a holy shield or staff.

He probably wore it so as not to be fooled by Kusla's words, or to protect himself from something even harder to deduce.

Kusla guessed what the old knight was thinking, humming carelessly as he observed through the window a scintillating night sky.

Even an unwavering grey knight believed superstition in the face of uncertainty.

Shrouded in obscurity, alchemists were only feared.

They were often said to be people who spent their days shut in dark homes trying to turn lead into gold, formulating medicines to reverse the effects of aging, attaching corpses together to create brand new organisms, and striving for other sorts of futile aim.

Although Kusla could not deny that such people existed, his opinion was that most considered "alchemists" were not so vain in their work. However, it would not be possible to explain exactly what they did in a few mere sentences.

The term "alchemist" was simply a provisional name for those in the practice of alchemy, colloquially used also for people who never know what they are doing.

More than being incomprehensible in their line of work, the place of alchemists in society was not understood. They were unlike the rulers governing a city, the clergymen raising believers, or the guild masters managing their members; alchemy did not fit into the recognizable facets of life for other people, thus granting it the perception of triviality - of uselessness.

When a king reigned over his city, it was traditional to divide the economic functions of his subjects into four groups: Nobles, to oversee vast estates of land and facilities; clergymen, to counterbalance noble authority; merchants, supporting markets, and; craftsmen, who contributed to architecture and the inflow of wealth to their city. Given this division of people into four ascribed categories, the management of a king's subjects was categorically simplified.

To actuate his hand, the king would entrust the leaders of each organization with appointment officially recognizing their status. Established craftsmen would operate as guild masters over their membership. Bakeries, butchers, blacksmiths, and virtually every other necessary economic activity had a guild.

The knights dragging Kusla through the snow were no exception from this system.

Their clothing, armor, candlesticks, pay, even the authority to bring Kusla out from prison - it was managed by royalty.

However, this management network was not developed to embolden royal frivolities. There was a need for centralized maintenance of a large city, and this management network was the result.

The laws of a city were established by a council comprised primarily of the famous people and nobles living within. This council established a code for a city's residents regarding what could or could not be done under the law.

Without that, a large city probably would not be capable of existing for one month.

Most notably among the reasons for disorder to ensue were the notoriously territorial craftsmen, who would undoubtedly trigger bloodshed.

Thus, all the guilds would regulate their members' actions, and the degree to which they performed such actions, to try mitigating strife as much as possible.

For example, those blacksmiths in charge of forging swords would only forge swords, while knife craftsmen would only make knives; there was strict classification between swords and knives. If there were any ambiguities in the difference, those who spent their lives forging swords would be inspired to make knives, and may end up robbing the knife-makers of potential customers. A source of conflict would be created as bakers start to operate as butchers, or butchers sell meat outside other shops in the middle of the night to harm the business of motels and inns. Perpetually, only chaos and decadence would exist in society.

God seemed unwilling to reign with Divine Punishment in this world, so knowing how to avoid conflicts altogether rather than settling them personally became an indispensable asset in life.

Using the blacksmith guild as an example, the subdivisions of labor within all four categories were made to a nauseatingly complicated extent.

There were various occupations for the blacksmith, like that of the swordsmith, whetting blacksmith, and farrier; locksmiths, plumbing pipes builders, incense makers, special metals craftsmen, and other specialists' work could also be ascribed to blacksmiths.

Every discernable craft seemed to have its own classification as a subdivision. Aside from sharing the same category, these subdivisions were mutually exclusive to one another. If a tradesperson wished to expand the scope of their wares, they were required to purchase the privileges for marketing each desired craft.

This was the venerated order those of society's upper echelon maintained.

Still no exception to this system, Kusla was a man who allegedly tried transforming lead into gold.

Among the many subdivisions of four categories, how would his work be classified?

Was he a lead pipe manufacturer? A goldsmith? Or perhaps he should be associated with those metallurgical workers who created gold by smelting ore obtained from mines?

Though some title of 'lead-to-gold transformer' could be applicable, what would researching the act make him? If such researchers truly existed, how would they be classified? Additionally, if turning lead to gold was against the proper conduct of mortals established by the ecclesiastical God, then wouldn't classification be under The Church's discretion rather than royalty?

Just one case of turning lead to gold was already so convoluted. Yet there were still more possibilities: What of transforming lead to silver? Turning silver into gold? Lumping corpses together to form a new creature? Creating a de-aging medicine? What about the other things not immediately identifiable but bound to occur in the future?

Considering this, it might not be the end-all for a city's existence, but such a mess of order would be virtually catastrophic to any orderly society.

In truth, the scheme was already plaguing society, as this problematic example Kusla spun was not entirely made up; for reasons not unrelated to producing gold, there were quite a few dignitaries in the city already willing to invest money in alchemists.

There were those who delegated such research for their eternal life to remain secured through The Church, mostly for the riches. A minority of those who sought research of transforming metals alchemically did so for knowledge. Research of this kind might lead to developments for increasing the efficiency of ore extraction, or improvements in metal purity after ore smelting. Given such an upper-hand, the wealth of an individual or even the wealth of an entire nation could compound sharply.

When it came to increasing the efficiency of extracting ores, for example, it would also require very disparate elements working together - like the strength of the ropes used to deliver the rocks, the durability of excavating tools, the design of such excavating tools, the invention of corrosives used to dissolve rocks, and further steps in the line of production. The industry of craftsmen, in its insular culture of many distinct subdivisions, would destroy itself before arranging the supply chain fit for this one unique task. Even if they could find a way, the craftsmen needed to be wary of exceeding their sub-divisional boundaries, with each transaction they would make in the city government's plain sight.

Thus, unlike craftsmen, those who merely sought "methods" instead of creating things were prized - but there was no management, organization, or standards used to govern them.

Moreover, when something new and foreign occurred, the issue of religion was certain to be implicated.

Even a lady, sensitive to trends, would be interrogated as a heretic if she were to break regulations on appropriate hairstyle. As a result, people were appropriately afraid of deviating from what was considered acceptable.

The Church did not take kindly to heretics, so arousing the suspicions of fellow neighbors was less than desirable for anyone.

Craftsman implicitly understood not to attract unwanted attention, just as all others subject to this system.

Those in authority who wanted to fool other kings and rulers had to do the funding themselves, raise the appropriate people, and protect them under their power. This was common practice in the world, especially in the case of those researching metals, from whom rulers hoped to attain unrealistic results. Over time, alchemists earned their unsavory name, yet the expectations many had in alchemy continued stirring.

It was not out of compassion that Kusla was uncaged by this armored trio.

They brought him as a member of the Knights of Cladius - a large organization with an almost unwieldy authority more involved in the business of hiring alchemists than any other.

"I suppose you don't mind listening to me as you eat?"

Marinated pork, bread baked with cheese, and warm mead were soon prepared. Kusla, who was only able to eat cold onions and black bread in prison, devoured the meal heartily. The warm mead trickled into his bellow, and he felt his stomach was finally taking form again.

"I never thought it would take two weeks...but we've formally obtained jurisdiction over you."

"So I still have that much value, huh?"

Kusla held a bun in the palm of his hand, peeling away its crispy outer layer. He removed a small bottle from his pocket, sprinkling its contents over the bread's doughy insides.

"Hey, that's--"

"It's just salt. Salt."

The old knight was nearly pale with shock.

"What, so you were joking...?"

"Nope, here's the arsenic."

Kusla proceeded to remove another bottle from his pants pocket, the old knight's eyes agape.

"I can give it to you if you want."

"...It's probably just salt anyway."

"It's better for both of us if that's what you believe."

Kusla returned the bottle to his pocket, the old knight feigning indifference as he leaned on the back of the chair. He then rubbed his eyes, staring at Kusla, yet leaning back ever so slightly more.

"Why must you make yourself out to be a scoundrel? You have common sense and decision-making abilities - rare traits that separate you from the rest. Don't laugh. I really feel this way. You are also virtuous, and have many other things those others lack. So why? Why did you steal the bones of a saint from The Church vault for your alchemy? Are you insane? Did you want to die?"

"There was no other way to test it out."

"You're lying! I've read the reports of your experiments. You of all people would challenge such superstitious methods!"

Kusla's mouth was stuffed with bread, his back arched inly so far that his chin nearly rested on the table. He lifted his gaze to the instigative Cladius Knight.

Their silence was covered by the darkness of night. The knight continued, hesitating to choose his words this time.

"Good thing it was before the fire was lit. If the skeleton was burnt, you would be turned to ash. Then..."

He was almost lethargic.

"...Why? Why must you waste such talent?"

"Why?"

Kusla's mouth was again stuffed with bread, and he tilted his head in response.

He shrugged, swallowing the mouthful like a bird, following through with mead.

"I don't really understand myself, but maybe you can understand if you slice open the skull of a highly-skilled alchemist."

"...Hm."

The old knight sighed at Kusla, who relentlessly indulged in the bread.

"Is it because of what happened to Friche?"

A pause. An irrevocable pause.

"As expected...but Friche was--"

"I don't know. She was a spy for the Pope's faction, and wanted to steal my metallurgical techniques, right?"

"...Yeah. There's solid evidence. Lots of it."

"Then wouldn't it be better to kill her as I enjoy myself with alcohol? Cut away her shapely collarbone which vibrantly defined itself every time she laughed, slice off those thin and exceptionally prominent ribs, gouge out that healthy liver of hers which will throb so beautifully upon even the gentlest touch, carefully rummage through her intestines to look for something; I can do anything to get what I want, even if it's something hidden inside the stomach...I'm not lying."

Kusla gulped down the lukewarm mead.

He was drinking mead just the same back then.

The irony of it all was almost overwhelming.

Kusla gave a hideous stare to the knight.

"Because I really wanted to try using the bones of a saint to smelt iron for a very long time."

Those of The Church would have fainted from fear, but the old knight remained characteristically unmoved.

"What happened to Friche...I can't help in that, and I really feel pity over it. But you were the one who leaked the news about what you wanted to do...because you loved her, I suppose?"

The aged knight's specialty was investigation of new members, after all.

At this point, Kusla almost felt it wasn't worth the effort to answer.

"If not for the fact that your plans were divulged, you two definitely would have been killed together."

Kusla let out a nonchalant sigh.

"Do you want to resign as an alchemist?"

It was a fatherly question.

Alchemists faced endless scorn for straying away from the right path, detested as heretics, and even as they could find protection from those in authority, they were only seen for their talents and lives. Occasionally, they met people with whom they got along with well, but all too often such people were spies.

Do I want to abandon this lifestyle so full of adversity?

"I can recommend you. It's not easy breaking away from us Cladius Knights...but I can find you some decent jobs. It's a good thing our organization's huge."

Kusla eyed the bearded man before him - his green eyes shone a light of compassion. *Such a good man*, he thought. This fortunate individual was born from a prestigious background, living his proud life as a knight to this age.

His words were most likely not lies; especially because the two had known one another for such a long time.

Kusla pressed his elbows on the table to support his head, his motions exaggerated in a way similar to someone trying to overcome drunkenness after too much alcohol.

Even in his impairment, Kusla resolved not to allow himself to falter now of all times. He fought the weight on his eyelids to keep an attentive gaze as he answered the knight's offer.

"I'll continue on. I have no other choice."

Despite consistently finding himself in circumstances such as these.

The old knight turned away from Kusla, heaving a heavy sigh - ostensibly in pity for so unfortunate a person.

"No matter what kind of experiences you go through, your curiosity will never cease. It's like you people caught a disease. It's for an extremely stupid reason, at that."

"Magdala, you mean?"

The old knight cleared his throat dryly, and he was probably unwilling to express his thoughts about this concept directly.

Alchemists were an existence woven deep in the fabric of the world's social order. They were not a part of any formal system, and their identities were never clear. They were often frowned upon and held in contempt. However, there were desirable aspects of being an alchemist, and many alchemists were talented artisans, but there was good reason to lead the scornful life of an alchemist.

To any observer, it was an extremely foolish aim, their dream - perhaps this was what set their insatiable curiosity loose.

And so, the afterworld to which alchemists looked forward was christened as the land of Magdala.

In retrospect, alchemists simply sought to enter Magdala, gambling everything on it - including their lives and pride.

"Because of you, the metal productivity here has increased tremendously, and the fuel cost has lowered quite a bit. The amount of money you helped the knights save was enough to rescue you from the Pope's faction planning to burn you at the stake."

The old knight paused to survey Kusla's reaction; he was staring at the table, motionless.

"The higher-ups considered it a waste to squelch that talent."

"Where's the next workshop?"

He asked, showing no interest in the old knight's words.

An alchemist's occupation was a unique one, and it required many diverse craftsman-like skills.

There were few replacements, and death was common.

They were often killed by others, and accidents were frequent.

Alchemists were like moths of gold flying dangerously close about a fire.

"It's just that I've never seen such a vile act. Even the Knights can't release you scot-free."

"...I'm already prepared."

"Gulbetty."

"Eh?"

Kusla unwittingly lifted his head; the placename took him aback.

"Near the front lines? Is it really alright to go somewhere like that?"

"I think it's the perfect case for you people."

"Gulbetty...Gulbetty..."

Kusla mouthed the word over, and after awhile, came to understand what the old knight meant.

"Us?"

"I suppose you know Wayland?"

The old knight's expression was bitter.

Were it not for that, Kusla would probably have feigned ignorance to his question; the name did surprise him, after all.

"Are you serious?"

"Dead serious. You and Wayland are to go to the workshop in Gulbetty."

"Heh."

He did not scoff at this, or even show his displeasure, but his astonishment compelled him to cough.

"What are you thinking!? You mean that Wayland!? The man who poisoned some Monastery Archimandrite to death and was arrested!?"

"Saint Ariel Women Monastery, the elegant Monastery full of noble princesses."

"Heh?"

This time, Kusla clearly smirked and shrugged his shoulders.

"Then why did The Church leave them?"

"Who knows? You two are alchemists, aren't you?"

The ones who make the impossible possible.

Turning lead into gold was a trademark phrase of theirs.

"In other words, Wayland and I are going to be in the same workshop?"

"You two were in the same workshop during your apprenticeship, so I suppose you two are amicable."

"You must be joking. He poisoned my food seven times."

"I heard you poisoned him nine times. Was it not because of your experiences with him that you two were able to escape being assassinated by poison?"

"Well, I think we've probably got Taurus' divine protection."

The sapphire which granted the intelligence to discern traps was a symbol of the Zodiac Taurus. Of course, he was mocking the old knight for wearing a sapphire ring, and the old knight consciously withdrew his left little finger.

But it had been a while since last Kusla heard the name Wayland, and he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

"What's your name? I don't think I'll be so easily pardoned. There has to be a serious punishment for my crime."

"I didn't hear the specifics, but I did dredge up a few rumors. I will be in trouble if I say it out here. The order I received from above was to deport you, and that you must obey sincerely. If you do well, your debt to the Knights as an alchemist will be written off, but if you fail, the debt remains. Of course, the premise is that,"

The old knight said with a sigh.

"That you're to turn lead into gold. Everything's set."

"I'll do it then."

Kusla answered immediately. Although there was no room to decline, he accepted the task heartily.

"It's just that I'm a little curious about what the higher ups are thinking."

The old knight accepted Kusla's curiosity with an unchanging expression; not even the faintest smile crossed his lips.

"I don't understand either."

"..."

"I miss my days on the battlefield. Back then, you could see the horizon at a moment's glance, no matter where you were."

These words, spoken with a sigh, did not sound at all to be a joke.

The Cladius Knights.

They were known by all across the land; they held unparalleled authority. It was an organization of great wealth and military strength.

In the past, The Church organized an army to launch a crusade and reclaim the holy land which laid in the East. This was the birth of the Knights.

The promised land recorded in the scriptures, Kuldaros, had long been occupied and trampled upon by pagans.

The Pope, Franjeans IV, could not accept this and took action against the pagans, making use of the theological theory presented by the distinguished theologian - Amelia's Saint Jubel. He dubbed the act of reclaiming the land a crusade; this signified that, even if they were to invade, they would receive God's forgiveness.

Twenty-two years had passed since the crusade began, and it had not yet come to an end.

Countless men wore armor engraved with the emblem of The Church, and some even engraved the emblem upon their own skin with ink - these men traveled to the East, their weapons in hand. Swordsmen and staff-wielding believers on pilgrimages alike wished to be buried in the promised land recorded in the holy scriptures.

The Cladius Knights' former identity, the Cladius Brotherhood, was an organization which provided services similar to a hospital's - namely housing and medical treatment - for those traveling to the holy land, be they a soldier who was soon to step on the battlefield, or believers on a pilgrimage.

However, there were quite a few people who died of wounds or disease before reaching the holy land.

They left wills leaving all of their inheritance to the Cladius Brotherhood, and departed from this world.

The Cladius Brotherhood obtained this fortune, and their wealth accumulated. It was necessary for them to strengthen their independent fighting force to maintain their fortune, but in the end, the

gentle monks became greedy knights. They could not be satisfied with the final requests of pious believers, and in their greed, became an organization with a voracious appetite for wealth.

At this point, their wealth and the number of their followers had exceeded the head of The Church, the Pope's own faction. There was not a man on Earth with the power to rival the Cladius Knights who held such overwhelming military might.

Although the rumors surrounding Kusla were exaggerated, he had been sentenced to death by The Church four times, and had managed to narrowly escape each time. This was proof that, for as long as the Knights, who were adept at measuring outcome against cost, felt that Kusla was still of value, even The Church would have difficulty sentencing him to death at the stake.

The same held true for Kusla. If there was profit in it, he could accept selling his life to the Knights as an alchemist. This was because Kusla wished to, at any cost, reach The Land of Magdala.

To this end, he had no choice other than to take the path of an alchemist and focus on research. The research, however, required a vast sum of money, and abundance of materials, a great deal of time, and the authority with which to protect himself from danger. If he were to lose the protection of the Knights, it would become impossible.

Thus, Kusla was supposed to work for the Knights like an obedient sheep. His act of throwing the bones of a saint into the furnace in order to see the results of the smelting was essentially suicide; it would not be odd for him to be abandoned.

After his release from prison, he departed for the northern town of Gulbetty during the freezing winter. He recalled the conversation he had with the old knight in the carriage, Friche's death, and that old knight's face.

"Heh."

Kusla gave a wry laugh.

Unfortunately for him, he failed.

Kusla had thought there was a possibility of it working. Even after dumping the saint's bones into the furnace in an attempt to refine metal of a higher quality, he could have been saved, but he panicked because Friche was killed. As he was overly sad, he did not know what he was doing. These reasons, coupled with what he had already accomplished at this point, could have protected him from the death penalty.

Were this not true, he could not have chosen such a treacherous path.

"...I really missed out on a golden opportunity."

Kusla muttered with a faint sigh.

It was entirely true that, when refining metal, burning bones could alter the outcome. At times, ash could be used in place of bones.

Yet the old knight's words were more or less correct. Friche was a good girl, and even after he had vaguely realized she may have been a spy, he might have been mesmerized by her innocent smile. It had been a while since last he met someone with whom he was happy to be together with.

Even so, when asked about the extent of his melancholy, Kusla hadn't any confidence with which to answer the question.

Alchemists originally believed in vicissitudes - that everything on this Earth was ever-changing. People died, the state of nature was always unique, and the old became anew in all things - and because of this, he believed that lead could become gold, and that foolhardy dreams could turn into realities.

But change waits for no man.

He continued to believe in and pursue change as he refined his metal; this was the essence of alchemy.

And so, the journey finally came to an end. Kusla's haunches had become stiff from sitting, and the carriage finally stopped. The driver, who had been silent for the entire trek, finally spoke.

"We're here."

"..."

Kusla stepped outside of the carriage, and the first thing he did was stretch.

For ten days he had been inside that carriage to avoid being sighted by passerby.

There were plenty of books he had to read along the way, so boredom was kept at bay despite his bodily aches. He felt as though it would be fine if they were to continue traveling.

It was a cold but clear day outside. The clarity of the air was unique to wintertime as he knew it.

The morning market seemed to have died down, and the farmers, who were probably from the surrounding villages, leisurely lead their cattle home for the day. All was seemingly still to Kusla, and in the ordinary lives of these town-goers, the only change came with the change of seasons; they would have a family to come home to each day.

The girl who had expressed such interest in him in the past was, inevitably, a spy. He realized he had fallen for her, but she had already been slain the moment he turned away from her.

Kusla did not think of this as something worth pity or sorrow. He considered the possibility of having much more regressed emotions than others thinking about it. Though Friche's fate was pitiful, and for her to be revived would be best, Kusla remained sane even after witnessing her death. All he was left with now was questioning as to how her death could be used for his alchemy.

Kusla wondered if this was why he felt a pang in his chest thinking of her. There was no long-lasting sorrow, and he wasn't burdened with anxiety. His apparent distance of emotions pained him perhaps even more than Friche's own death.

This is quite an excessive wish. Kusla sighed as he left the city's checkpoint. His identity was only confirmed by a single guard, and his bags remained untouched; such were just a few of the special privileges of the Knights had. Most of the council members in this small town were forcefully taken under the jurisdiction of the Knights, and to this upstart town's citizenry, it was far from amusing.

It for this reason that they normally looked upon the Knights with disapproval, but the real reason Kusla got through so remarkably unscathed was due to his status as an alchemist too. The people of this town with common sense would rather conspire with heretics than involve themselves with an alchemist.

Kusla's back ached from the ten days he spent riding in a carriage; he walked with methodical care to avoid worsening his injuries.

The city's walls were thick, and near the gates there were numerous facilities offering hospitality to the guards. The guards patrolled through some vestibule, presumably inside of the city's walls, with bows and catapults in stacks. Their armor was not covered in paint, but in oil - or perhaps blood that had yet to dry completely.

Alchemists were only summoned for matters of the utmost urgency.

Most notably among the reasons for summoning his ilk: Issues concerning money.

Were it simply a case of monetary issues, the solution would be quite simple and direct - like chopping someone's head off with a sharp axe.

Kusla whistled glibly as he entered through the gates, put at ease by the town's picturesque scenery behind those fat walls. In terms of scale, Gulbetta was of another caliber than what Kusla was accustomed to.

There was ample river water flowing through the portway, and four arched bridges stretching across it.

After passing the gates, what he found was there precisely as had been described to him. The freight carriages and mule carts were gathered in a group to the side of the road. Wagons laden with chicken cages passed him.

Some hooded foot travelers, their eyes tanned, each carried a cargo larger than themselves. They were, most likely, part of a trading company that passed through the snow-capped mountains at the end of the year, and the cargo they carried likely consisted of pelts obtained from hunting or other items like amber and beeswax. The seasonal journey they made to turn a profit was known to be arduous.

The road was covered with the dung of horses and mules. A hoard of domesticated pigs and escaped chickens emerged from the throngs to the side of the road, trotting about insouciantly.

Of course, not everything was so trivial: There were treacherous people who leaned against the wall, observing the townspeople; robbers, bandits, prostitutes, and even hunters who were present trying to, on behalf of their respective leaders, find a chance to bag the escaped farm animals. Preoccupied with fondling their coin, the only dangerous wallflowers not interested in the loose livestock were the money exchangers of the black market - and in a sense, theirs was a form bred from luck and chance. The reason these black market dealers could be in daylight was because they were necessary to so many people.

Kusla was not the type to relish such calm.

If he could choose, he would be in a more noisy and bustling atmosphere the interior gates.

Also, there was a port in this city; that's where its heart should be.

Seeing as the area around the gate was boisterous, there should be even greater a clamor near the port.

The Cladius Knights had absolute control over the town.

So long as he wore their crest, no man would dare to wrong him.

"Not bad."

Kusla took a deep breath, perhaps in an attempt to cleanse his lungs, inhaled the dust-filled air, and smiled.

The youths inviting customers into their shops, the prostitutes, and the black market dealers dared not approach Kusla, as an unusual air was about him they saw best to avoid.

"Where to?"

The driver asked Kusla, but did not look to his face.

"Who knows? I heard someone's here to meet us."

The driver held his silence. His left finger, which held the reins, was halved, and there was a large scar from a blade across the side of his face, which he concealed fairly well with a hat and beard extending behind his ears; he was likely a retired veteran who had long served the Knights. It was probable that he was chosen to kill Kusla, should he try escaping, rather than guard him.

"..."

The driver suddenly lifted his head.

He sensed the gazes upon them in an instant, like a wild hare.

He snapped the reins and turned the carriage toward a corner of the intersection.

A scrawny man stood there, a grin on his face.



"You're safe, hmmn?"

He placed particular emphasis on the vowels at the end of the question. His ruffled blond hair was tied back in a bundle, and one had to wonder whether he wished to trim his unkempt beard or leave it as it was. Even so, he was the only man in the world who would welcome Kusla with a grin.

Kusla reflexively curled his lips, returning the smile, and spoke.

"You're one to talk. Why are you still alive?"

"I guess God was protecting me!"

Again, he spoke with that peculiar quality of drawn vowels for emphasis, and it was all too familiar to Kusla. Be it on purpose or not, poisoning an Archimandrite to death would certainly result in punishment with the death sentence, and yet there stood Wayland before him, very much alive. Alchemists were, just as that old knight had said, magicians.

"And how did you survive? I heard you dumped the bones of a saint into a furnace and burned them?"

"The fire wasn't lit, and the key was that I gave an excuse. Divine Retribution spared me, for I was innocent and thought the saint was cold."

Wayland kept walking, looked at his fingernails, and shrugged.

"What about you?"

"Me? I didn't poison him."

"...What do you mean?"

"In other words, while that fat man was guzzling down his food, I appeared in front of his table, smiled in front of him, and shook a little bottle in front of him. He then turned pale and dropped dead."

This was the trick Kusla had alluded to when he was teasing the guards, but such methods were very real.

Because the tactic killed a man, however, it seemed Wayland had planned it well in advance.

"But why would you do that?"

"He was hitting on my girls."

Wayland's expression seemed to ask, "What other reason could there be?" To which Kusla had no choice but to nod in acceptance.

"Wasn't he a Monastery Archimandrite?"

"I said he was flirting around with the nuns. The Archimandrite of a female monastery need not be female."

Kusla could only shrug at Wayland's ability to manage such an amazing feat. Even with the decadence of clergymen, Wayland romantically involved himself with the nuns, who might as well have been caged birds.

"That fatty did a lot of bad things people don't normally see, and, in the people's eyes, I was getting rid of a plague. The nuns of the monastery were begging for me to save them, so I got off scot-free. I'm worshipped as a hero at the monastery."

"You've always been good at this type of thing."

"It's just that you're not good at it, Kusla."

Kusla had once fallen for a spy's sweet words; he fell in love, hook, line, and sinker, only for her to be killed. He shrugged and kicked aside a chicken as it flew by.

"But it's really shocking..."

Kusla sauntered forward and listened calmly.

"I never thought I would be working in the same workshop as you again, Kusla."

"That's my line."

"How many times have we met in the Knights' prison?"

Kusla had been in and out several times, and Wayland himself was no slouch in this department, so the two of them would frequently meet behind bars.

"But when was the last time we were together in the workshop?"

Wayland paused to answer.

"Hm...that was five years ago, right? I really miss those days."

Whenever they recalled what happened five years ago, they felt they had been nothing but immature fools - a thought one could only grimace upon.

The two of them were constantly quarrelling, and, after learning a little, would steal poison from the workshop for use in the other's food.

However, their master was a devil far worse than they, so on the day of their graduation, Kusla and Wayland planned to poison him. After their master had finished half of his mercury-laced food, they were apprehended.

When the two of them parted ways, Kusla bid Wayland farewell, and they both exchanged genuine smiles. The scene was still fresh in Kusla's mind.

"You were easily moved to tears back then, Kusla."

"You're one to talk. Aren't you pretty well acquainted to teariness?"

Wayland shrugged, abruptly stretched his shoulders with audible relief, and turned back to face Kusla.

"Anyway, let's hurry to greet the one who'll be hanging us, and head to the workshop. I'm looking forward to it."

The executioner he referred to was the one in charge of alchemical operations with the Knights who owned a workshop in the city.

He would be involved in not only providing the alchemists' necessary resources for work, but also in assisting the alchemists, were they to be etched with a certain brand from some Church faction or sentenced to be burned at the stake. On the other hand, if an alchemist could no longer serve the Knights, or was deemed worthless, they would normally either sell the alchemist to The Church or assassinate them.

As unusual as it seemed, the Knights truly did reserve the right to kill on their own whims.

That was why these individuals were called 'Hangmen'.

They were not known as executioners because an alchemist didn't have the right to accept a swift punishment like decapitation, which was used on the common folk. Burning at the stake killed too quickly, so it could be considered too easy as well. Basically, they would hang an alchemist with the dogs, and the alchemist would be scratched and gnawed upon by these agitated dogs for three or four days before they could die.

Kusla had to remind himself not to smirk internally as he questioned Wayland.

"So you haven't been to the workshop yet?"

"Nope. I just sent the goods there. I only arrived this morning with the Knights' Freight Unit."

"So you just arrived?"

"Right."

"Couldn't you have gone first?"

"How could you expect that of me?"

Wayland dragged his voice out mockingly.

"Part-ner?"

"I'm shivering."

"You're cruel!"

Wayland enjoyed imitating a dog's whimper, just as Kusla enjoyed teasing the prison guards. The town of Gulbetty was located near the frontlines, and the citizens, who were accustomed to seeing both mercenaries and knights no differently from thieves, would panic and hurry away from them.

Alchemists.

Those despicables who strayed from the path.

When he was young, Kusla would reply to spiteful remarks with a cold sneer.

However, he lacked motivation anymore, and, at most, teased the guards. Wayland, on the other hand, seemed no different from his days as an apprentice, and would commit murder without so much as blinking.

"But I agree with going to the workshop. I wish to melt this cold air within me - like smelted metal," Kusla mused.

"Given its exterior, I think it's in rather good condition. As expected of a facility on the frontlines."

This Northern land was where the Cladius Knights concentrated both its finances and military might; they made use of Gulbetty as a base. It was only natural that the northernmost land belonged to the Knights - and there was no one who dared to mock the Knights, as their power was well understood.

Many avaricious alchemists wished for and dreamt of a workshop situated near the frontlines; with such a position, they could strike while the iron was hot. People would do anything for the sake of winning.

There was an infinite supply of funds, they could have books given to them with priority, and they had the coveted right to do business with the local craftsmen and mines. There were also many benefits for them, like being able to leaf through secret and forbidden books.

Kusla would probably be delighted were it not for the condition by which he had arrived to the front lines: He had to be with Wayland.

"But what about the man who made use of the Gubletty workshop before us? He's truly a fool to hand over such a nice workshop to us."

Kusla stepped around a pile of horse dung while speaking, and Wayland replied in a manner not unlike how one might describe yesterday's weather (in his characteristically drawn voice).

"I heard he died."

"Oh? Did he die of an accident?"

The two passed a dog leashed to a door, its mouth stained with fresh, red blood. It was likely that it had gone hunting early that morning - the prey was, naturally, some living thing roaming about town.

"No, I heard he was killed by someone in town."

Kusla evaded the horse dung which lined the roads, offering no response.

Although he understood such things were common, something still concerned him.

The Knights were the ones to assign them this time; clearly they considered it some form of punishment.

"Don't tell me we're working as a pair because of this."

"Hm...that's what I think. They're sending we unscrupulous folks to such a good place, there's certainly something they're hiding."

Wayland scratched his head as he walked, feigning concern.

He was the type to scoop up rocks from the roadside, then cut, grind, and observe and play with them to entertain himself. If he were to look disinterested, it meant he was displeased.

"We might be killed if we're alone, so two people will make it comforting, huh?"

The two of them walked in silence. Kusla turned to Wayland, and Wayland kicked a pebble.

"Belittled alchemists are doomed."

"Haha. That waste of a master taught us that!"

The two of them stood before the hangman's house.

Kusla recalled that scene from five years ago, and his shoulders stiffened.

"You scared?"

"That's my line."

It had been five years since Kusla had bickered with someone in this way.

He wanted to suppress the nostalgia, but was unable to, his mouth curled at the ends.

The pedestrians nearby were terrified, so they parted, leaving a path for the two.

"I know you two specialize in poisoning and assassinations."

The man held down the parchment with a paperweight made of pure gold, and proceeded to roll his pen fluidly on the table as he spoke.

His elegant handwriting was a treat to the eyes. It was a mystery as to how such a thick, pudgy hand could write so fluidly.

He was the Gulbetty Freight Corps Leader belonging to the Cladius Knights, Alan Post.

It was the Corps' job to provide food and wine to the soldiers, or to transport certain necessities. It was also the case that most of the Freight Corps were very active on the battlefield.

However, the higher ups among the Knights differed in role.

The Knights promote themselves boldly, claiming their actions are sanctified by Divine Will, and they would use this excuse to collude together with the guilds for trading. The marketplace was essentially hostage to what they do, namely with finances and information brokering, and the same was true for making a profit. That was because merchants naturally sought profits where they do business, especially places in which war was prevalent, and the Knights saw benefit in being the instigators of war.

Alan Post, who sat in front of them, had absolute control over the bloodstream known as finance flowing around Gulbetty. He made lots of profit with his manipulation, and his plump body was similarly enriched as his coffers were. His belly pressed against the hollowed office table as he continued his work.

"Why would I assassinate? My love suffered the same fate."

"There's no way I would poison someone! I won't use poison."

Kusla and Wayland still in the middle of the room, answering their own questions as their eyes wandered.

"Well, I'm not trying to blame you - just to give my opinion."

Neither of the two knew quite how to express their delight properly.

Wayland responded by stretching his back, while Kusla started to pick at his fingernails.

"Such actions aren't bad, however. When you enter a room for the first time, you can only give someone else a first impression once. If you look down on your superiors right at the beginning, it'll come back to haunt you."

Kusla darted his glance aside to Wayland, and Wayland did the same to Kusla.

Both of them sighed and adjusted their postures erect as they eyed ahead.

"And when you sense that your secrets are revealed, you pretend to obey, huh? Well, you passed."

Post handed the parchment to the butler waiting beside him, continued to blink his small and fiery eyes, and went on to rub them.

"Shower the opponent in flowers to make them careless, and then remove their footing. That's good."

"You want to show that you're not an easy superior to deal with, and stop us from spouting anything?"

Kusla spoke as he looked up at the ceiling, and Post's rotund build quaked in laughter.

"You certainly are smart. These are indeed the two I requested from the Knights."

Kusla felt something that didn't fit in what he said.

"...What do you mean?"

"I have to protect my own body."

"With poison and assassination?"

Post smirked, but his eyes were bereft of any benevolence they had before.

"The best defense is a good offense. This is the only rule I taught myself in the military."

This time, Kusla honestly looked for Wayland's expression, instead of it being a mere act.

Looks like we got ourselves into a troublesome situation.

"Your predecessor's a man named Thomas Blanket. He was an outstanding man, probably reaching his forties, but who is now dead."

His manner of speech was so blunt and pensive that it was somehow indicative of how one might speak to a wilted flower with dignity. Kusla spoke up.

"Your Excellency Post, was he murdered under your nose or something?"

The leader of this town - to be in such a state. Kusla's curled lip betrayed the thoughts running through his head.

Of course, if he were someone too easily agitated by such taunting, he would not be sitting in this seat.

"To be honest, that is the case, and we still have not caught the culprit."

"Not caught?"

"Surprising, isn't it? The people of The Church, who want to win back authority over this town, are trying their best, but still can't find out. The death of an alchemist is normally attributed to some conflict of faith. As long as they can get proof of heretics, they can immediately seize the chance to pull me down."

The Knights honor God, and not the Pope, who governed The Church.

Hence the explicit need for an independent army, finances, and doctrine all at once.

No matter which town it was, there would be a conflict over the jurisdiction between The Church and the Knights.

"So I say, we have no idea of the kind of people who killed Thomas, and we don't know why. We don't know if it was an accident, a slug fest between drunkards, a robbery, or a test of a new sword. Maybe some sort of witch hunt with a bias against alchemists, or maybe The Church wanted to get Thomas' alchemy results and was refused by him. Maybe he defected and was killed to shut up."

He paused before continuing.

"Well, we don't know the enemy, and we can't establish a plan, but we can't seal the town up like this either."

"There's still a method of protection for people like us known as imprisonment."

"That's for people who're higher-ranked than me. Besides, I hate those who slack around and breathe in the same stale air for all their lives."

Kusla shrugged, raising his hand to acknowledge that he should not have interrupted.

"Right now, the metal equipment in the town is in a most dire state. The war north of Gulbetty is still alright, but most of the mining hills in the north are still in the pagans' hands. Even if we tried to manufacture and refine weapons in the south, the labor cost would be too high, and there would be too much tax taken along the journey. Also, there are things we have to transport like wheat, rye, barley, grape wine, alum...even the oat those Knights' military horses consume. If we don't supply them, there'll be short supply."

"In other words..."

People dwelled upon their limited past experiences through life, and may lose foothold over their lives forever. It often took people some time before they realized the time they'd wasted - and some never do.

However, an alchemist's life too short to encourage idleness.

Post paused for a moment after being interrupted by Kusla, and seemed to take some delight in picking up from his interjection as Kusla pondered.

"In other words, this town needs alchemists with exceptional skill in metallurgy to increase the production of metals, but since we're unable to explain the death of the last guy, we can't find acceptable successors."

"In other words, we're the sacrificial pawns."

"Even on the battlefield, such people are unnecessary for the sake of an ultimate victory."

Alright, so we're sent to our deaths.

Post showed the composure only a man who had given so many other such commands could give. His face was a chilling calm.

Neither Kusla nor Wayland had any intentions of protest.

However, it wasn't because they lacked the upper hand. More appropriately, an alchemist wouldn't care after being this deeply ensnared.

"So you mean we can stay here as long as we don't die?"

"You said it. Besides, warriors who come back from the brink of peril will certainly become heroes. I don't think the collateral will be very negligible."

The workshops near the battlefield have what could be considered an unlimited budget. Normally, it was not a place they would send young and barbaric alchemists like Kusla and company to operate.

If they stuck with the plan, the risk involved would also be on their shoulders.

"The good thing is that the town is under my control. I certainly won't allow such violence to happen again, and I'll clean up this area as much as I can. Do your best."

Post narrowed his eyes. His expression was grave, the expression of a person in authority, where everyone other than him were mere pawns to be used.

Kusla did not like it, but the reasons guiding Post's actions were understandable enough. In this sense, he felt there was a certain level of trust between them.

Kusla and Wayland followed the Knights' style in salute, "Yes, sir." It was a weak attempt to poke fun at the Knights' formality, which Post heartily laughed off. His perspicuity was more than it seemed at first.

"Ah, yes."

Just when Kusla and Wayland were about to step through the door, Post called them to stop.

"I do have to apologize to you regarding something."

"Hmn?"

"I did try my very best, but there are some things that can't be helped."

"What is it?"

He answered the inquisitive Kusla.

"You'll understand when you reach the workshop. Well, if you're good at poison and assassination, there's often a way."

The two shrugged their shoulders.

"...Please excuse us."

Wayland opened the door for them both to exit.

The subordinates carrying books along the corridor were lined up, their faces tense.

There was nothing to be hidden from a ruler who personally wrote his own papers.

Leadership often fell from glory because they of subordinates' betrayal. Such rulers weren't able to hide from their secretaries anything they wanted to keep secret.

On the other hand, Post could hide all his secrets and fabricate reports as he needed.

It seemed the land near the battlefield was not a place knights could calmly cleave their way through.

This building seemed to store all the things taken from the guilds in this town - perhaps even the building itself was taken just the same. Upon coming outside, they found the Knights' flag cast high in the sky, declaring their authority unashamedly.

In the plaza outside of the building there was a bronze statue of a soldier clasping onto a magnificent sword, symbolizing the city's independence, but it really held little more than ornamental qualities.

Whoever could swing the metaphorical sword to slay sinners was governor of this town.

However, the Knights wielded their authority to summon alchemists and the authorities at the town wall who wouldn't check their bags.

So, since authority made the natural order of things in this town, Kusla and Wayland's fates were all decided by Post. The authority was wide in scope, and at the same time, heavy.

Kusla and Wayland went by the flag and the guards, narrowed their eyes in the midday sun, and stared into the bustling streets.

"What do you think?"

Kusla asked this to Wayland, who was speechless as they stood at Post's desk.

Wayland was the type who hardly talked to Post's ilk, though not because Post was someone he was unacquainted with. Instead, he was thinking of how to kill the other party.

This was something Kusla heard of 5 years ago when they were still wet behind the ears.

"I can't tell with just that."

"That's true."

"But it's like mining. No matter the metal, God never gave it in its purest form."

"In other words?"

Wayland gave a subtle grin.

"In other words, we continue work as usual."

After finishing their lunch in the middle of the town market, Kusla and Wayland were off to this new workshop.

Since the city was so bustling where they stood, there had to be a quieter place elsewhere. They strolled along a stretch of empty houses, and their field of vision burst open after passing through.

An expansive urban landscape was right before their eyes, and the frothy sea stretched from afar and into the horizon.

It was beautiful.

They wondered about why the area around them was so devoid of noisy strollers, and realized thereupon that it was probably because they were at the face of the cliff. Some architectural beauty of an alchemist's workshop probably lied here.

"That's quite the extravagant workshop."

"That Thomas guy sure is something."

A battle was meaningless if final victory was never won.

Kusla and Wayland would probably have to use unscrupulous methods to win their battles just the same, and only once they won would the costs be considered. If the production of one alchemist alone

was effective enough to overturn the entire battle situation, operating in plain site from a workshop among the citizenry (complete with this resplendent landscape) was a necessary evil.

Wayland grinned as he waved to Kusla from a distance. They went to the side of the workshop, looked down to the civilization below, and even Kusla was shocked.

"A waterwheel too?"

"And the water's flowing through the ravine we passed. I think there's a culvert dug deliberately under here, but it doesn't seem that we have all the water to ourselves after all."

Kusla followed Wayland's stare and looked down to the bottom of the cliff, scanning below and catching glimpse of the harbor. There were several water wheels spinning, and various buildings gathered around them; it was difficult to tell if they were for flour mills, threshing, or some other craft though.

The strength of the waterwheel was decided by the water current, and the current was decided by the height from which it fell.

The workshop was built at the bridge. The place where Kusla and Wayland stood was the first level, the workshop took up two levels below, and the waterwheel was at the bottom. This meant that the full force of the water was down below.

Before now, Kusla had to cooperate with craftsmen to share facilities like the waterwheel. Considering his past, this was a luxury worthy of appreciation.

"The furnace is up to snuff. They actually built such a large furnace here, huh. Well, I guess they allowed it begrudgingly because it's next to a waterwheel."

"We can wash it off with the water if there's a fire."

Wayland turned to Kusla with a look of curiosity.

"Then the people below will be affected."

Though, even if it actually happened, he would remain unfazed.

For an alchemist, he fit the stereotype pretty well.

He would not care about the trivialities of others' lives, and he still would not have much concern even if major events occurred to them. Kusla, who had realized Wayland's removal from virtually everything else in the world, would sometimes think this way too, or rather, he was only concerned about these things out some nebulous sense of obligation.

"But what's the thing that fat uncle wanted to apologize about?"

"Hm...what was it...I can't think of it."

They lifted their eyes away from the waterwheel and appreciated the beautiful scenery. Brightened by sunlight, the atmosphere allayed any sense of apprehension they might have felt about the situation.

"Maybe he's just bluffing us. Let's hurry in, it's cold."

"Right, let's go on in."

Kusla felt a little reluctant as he looked away from the cliff - not that it would be his last, but its unparalleled quality was alluring.

He came to Wayland, who was anxiously unlocking the workshop with the brass key they'd been given. The door opened, and Kusla walked right into Wayland, who had stopped abruptly, from behind.

"Hey, what's with you?"

Kusla chided Wayland in frustration, looking past him to catch of glimpse of the inside.

The stone wall was lined with wood against the floor, and the walls were crammed with a seemingly endless collection of sundries - as though some psychotic inhabitant did the decorating. The room was certainly not dirty, but the amount of effort to maintain it all seemed questionable.

Kusla found himself more surprised that this would cause Wayland to freeze up.

The moment he'd thought this, a foreign voice spoke from the room.

"I see you've finally arrived?"

Past Wayland, the source of this voice resounded like an avalanche against the building's thick walls, echoing with clarity.

The inflection of a voice often carried surprisingly more information than its content. An accent could betray an accurate impression of the physique or facial features of a person, and their elocution roughly betrayed the person's status. A speaker's disposition was most evident in their tone, as people's emotions invariably carried with speech.

All things considered about the voice he heard, Kusla was able to deduce that the person in front of him was to be expected as an overseer for the two.

Until he shouldered past Wayland in the doorway. Kusla rubbed his eyes again - the sight too unbelievable.

What is this person doing in an alchemist's workshop?

There was a petite nun fully dressed in a robe that went to her toes.

Her robe had patterns belonging to a Knights-affiliated monastery along the edges.

She did not come in mistakenly. Probably.

"Who are you?"

Wayland prided himself in that if they were together, he would remain silent and let his partner handle the talking, while he would only focus on how to kill the opponent; at this point, he spoke in an unfriendly tone.

"My name is Ul Fenesis. I have been dispatched here by the Knights of Cladius."

Here robe was white, with a veil covering the top of her head. She looked just like a doll, with wide emerald eyes and distinctly white bangs. It was not unheard of to see hair that was a sort of alabaster in shade, but it was definitely rare to see such eggshell white strands.

"I am here to watch over you."

Fenesis seemed untroubled by Kusla and Wayland. After introducing herself, she rose herself up from her chair to stand. As to why there was no difference in height either when she was sitting or standing, it was because her feet could not touch the floor when she sat in the chair.

She was a child.

However, her expression suggested anything but childlike naiveté. She carried an air of boundless gravity.

Now what do I do?

Kusla turned to see Wayland obliquely over the shoulder, but any expression that was there on his face had long since escaped him.

"Should you do anything that deviates from God's path, I will report it to my superiors. Please, do not forget God's Teachings, do not break God's Order, and do not sully God's Prestige. You would do well to remember these three points as you work for the Knights - for God."

Her manner was everything like a monasterial Induction Ceremony, but the troubling thing was that the nun before them, Fenesis, wore a gravely serious expression.

This girl, who was surprisingly smart for her age, was reminiscent of the fanatics Kusla ran across every so often.

Narrow-minded, honest in expression...

Post might have been apologizing for this. The Knights' bureaucratic structure was not steady as a rock on land. It felt like confirmation of how this world consisted of three kinds of people: those who fight, those who prayed, and those who sowed.

The alchemists hired by the Knights were part of the ones who battled, as they were basically involved in developing weapons or technology to break cities down. Alchemists would be registered under the "Baggage Teams" as they were needed to make various materials.

Nevertheless, Fenesis was clearly a vanguard of the praying lot. Given her position as a nun, she was probably a member of the Knights' Choir. Of course, they were different from The Church's Choir. The Church's Choir would praise God in a silent chapel, while the Knights' Choir exalted in the midst of a sanguinary battlefield.

The nature and direction of organized faith was different from what the Knights' Choir had. It was hideous and power-oriented. Their forced lied in wait to strike, hoping to steal the Battle Corps' authority. The Church and even its allies were eager to take Alan Post down, so a wounded Knights of Cladius might be left hobbling in a forest of predators. If the Knights' "spare" alchemists were killed as well, they would look for an opportunity to take control of Gulbetty.

The more troublesome thing for Kusla was that, though the Knights' Choir were a part of the Cladius Knights, they had always viewed alchemists as their mortal enemies.

The people of the Choir sincerely thought that they were existences that defied God, and had to be erased from the land.

They had yet to discover who killed Thomas.

This meant the killer could be hiding inside the organization.

"And your answer?"

Fenesis lifted her chin as she asked.

He recalled how a certain wretch of a nun at the nearby monastery years back would punish him by slapping his face with a cane.

For such a determined people, first impressions were key.

As Kusla considered this, he started to reach his hand out.

Wayland, who had been imitating a statue before now, sprung forward and offered his hand first.

A handshake.

Surprisingly, he seemed to have the same idea. Fenesis looked surprised, but still reached her hand out to return the gesture. That was a human response.

However, Wayland's hand went past hers, and soon met its objective.

The nun Fenesis widened her eyes as they caught sight of Wayland's incoming hand.



The hand that twitched all its five fingers in a singular motion bound right for her chest.

"Hm?"

Wayland shifted his hand around with a discontented frown, looking as though he did not find what he was looking for.

He went to confirm it again, the other hand outstretched.

Fenesis recoiled from Wayland's second incursion and swung her hand at his face.

"Humph."

Wayland effortlessly bent back to dodge.

She did not show any reaction - not because the slap was evaded, but rather, because her brain had yet to process what had just transpired. Kusla, too, was stunned by what Wayland did.

Her slap seemed to be an instinctive reaction.

However, could not well maintain her balance due to the sudden dodge, and Fenesis staggered greatly before she fell against Wayland's chest.

"--!"

All at once, she seemed to regain control of herself.

She pried at Wayland's hand, hoping to escape his vice-like grip.

Wayland's grabbed onto Fenesis' slender arm, and the difference in strength caused her body to jerk.

"What are you doing--"

Fenesis' frantic protests were so high-pitched that Kusla barely understood her her.

Wayland, who was holding onto the nun's arm pressing against his chest to push him away, used his other hand to cover the girl's face, ostensibly trying to seal her mouth. The little face was covered completely by his hand, and Kusla gasped without a second thought.

Proceeding, he brought the wide-eyed Fenesis level to himself, intent as though he were trying to see into her mind.

"This is an alchemist's workshop. It is rather--dangerous for a child to roam around here."

"Gh-- Ugh!"

Wayland might have seemed scrawny, but he did train his body better than those roadside mercenaries for the sake of his metallurgy. He stood tall and steady no matter how Fenesis struggled.

Her mouth was shut, and her eyes dared not shut for a moment; it was an instinctive fear - that her skull would be cracked.

Wayland wordlessly focused his stare into Fenesis' eyes. She continued to writhe about, but she could not move half an inch beyond his forceful control.

Her body quivered, most likely out of fear rather than any struggle.

"Humph."

Wayland then let out what sounded like a bored snort, and took his hands off her.

She stumbled back, wide-eyed, and shakily remained standing for mere seconds before collapsing onto the floor, dessicated.

Kusla had no need to look up to sense Wayland's gaze.

"I'll go into the workshop here. Handle the rest."

He went and quickly descended the staircase.

It was already too late by the time Kusla realized he had gone overboard.

However, the good in it was underscored by the most basic of basics in matters of human association.

If someone instilled overwhelming fear or thorough discomfort in a victim, it would be easier for a third person to get close to that victim. Fenesis had bad luck when she introduced herself as their monitor, and Kusla was fortunate not to do anything back then.

Wayland took on the role of the antagonist, and pushed the troublesome Samaritan's role to Kusla.

Even so, Wayland grabbed her without hesitation, and threatened her without mercy. His mental state was truly terrifying.

Kusla had no other choice.

It was impossible to try and salvage matters. He could only sigh and act as the third character. Since the pitiful girl came as a member of the prayer group in the name of supervising them, it meant that she was made the monitor of the workshop, and it had nothing to do with her will.

Despite her humiliation, she would come by the next day, and the day thereafter.

If he did not patronize her well, he would be unable to carry out his work well.

This wasn't to say Kusla felt no annoyance about the situation.

Seeing her, he chastised himself for being unable to take action, and knelt down beside the small nun who let her tears roll silently down her cheeks.

Fenesis let out a sob, backing away from him in fear.

"Are you alright? That man's a little weird in the head."

It would be the first line of a long, long consolation.

Act 2

Fenesis cried for a few short moments.

Just as Kusla reached his hand out, she retreated back across the floor.

Kusla had been more or less accustomed to this situation. He did not pursue her without reason, but he decided to pretend he was unconcerned as he watched over her.

He tidied the books and the parchment rolls that were moved into the workshop. Kusla lined them alongside the items left behind by the former resident alchemists, and swapped out the material he had yet to read. There were a number of books made from the leather of large animals like deer or items hard as a board, some of them even laced with gold foil. One would find, upon opening them, long and flowing print with vibrant illustrations. It was evidently a very labor-intensive process

Normally, these were characteristic of an Archbishop's belongings - or a Cardinal's, those of a Large Lavra, or a large Cathedral's.

It was a wonder how many such books there were.

A workshop near the battlefield is really amazing.

Kusla thought.

After working for quite a while, he caught something move in the corner of his eye, and found that Fenesis, who calmed down, was using her hands to support herself in her attempt to stand up.

It seemed she still could not stand up.

Kusla stuffed the parchment scrolls into the bookshelf, and walked over to her with a sigh.

Upon hearing the footsteps, Fenesis looked up at Kusla in surprise. She stared at the Kusla, who reached his hand out, looked at the hand, and then up at the face before grabbing it and standing up.

However, her feet were trembling like a newly-born fawn, and Kusla practically lifted her up and saddled her on the chair. Her body was dainty, and as she was still young, her breasts were still small, to the extent that they could not fit into Wayland's opened hand.

Despite this, her body was well-proportioned, and there was a sense of elegance in the firmness of the chest.

If seen as a feline's body, she certainly could be seen as some cat pampered in a mansion.

"You got into quite a disaster here."

Kusla said as he poured the tea made from dried vanilla grass. The girl, whose eyes were swollen from the sobbing, would sniffle from time to time as she stared at the table.

"But randomly approaching an alchemist itself is a mistake. Nobody told you before you came here?"

Kusla brought the cup emitting steam right in front of Fenesis, and she arched her back as an ostensibly suspicious item was brought in front of her.

Someone must have reminded her.

"Nn?"

After being prompted with the question again, Fenesis looked over at Kusla with her teary swollen adamant eyes.

"But...I never..."

"Well, that's true."

In response to Fenesis, who answered with a hoarse voice, Kusla steeled himself with an inclined attitude.

“If I wasn’t around, who knew what’ll happen to you.”

“!”

Her body stiffened. This time, her face shuddered in fear, and she cupped her shoulders.

She swore at the monastery.

Obedience, impoverished.

And also, purity.

“Wayland...well, he’s that kind of beast who’ll eat everything. No matter how young that girl is, even if she’s a nun, he’ll take them all.”

“...”

Fenesis cuddled her shoulders, and stared right at Kusla with a terrified look she found difficulty in hiding.

“Also, those genuine alchemists have something more terrifying than an appetite for the flesh. For a beast like Wayland, a pure maiden is the best toy that can provide three times the enjoyment.

“...?”

Kusla raised 3 fingers, and Fenesis was completely fearful of this notion she could not imagine as she showed a completely disoriented expression.

“First, they can obtain good ingredients from a maiden for experimenting, like the hair strands, fingernails, tears, and fresh blood.”

She could not make even a whimper as she gritted her teeth and tensed her body.

“As for the second, of course, there’s no need for me to say this. The one being delighted...well, it’s painful.”

This time, the girl’s gritted teeth pressed against her lips, and she lifted her lower jaw slightly at Kusla.

The enemy of all women; or rather, an act below that of a beast.

“And, the last method of enjoyment.”

“...That?”

The reason why she could ask was because the second act was something easy to understand; it was an evil act everyone knew of.

Her anger was easily understood, and this question was more or less the best remedy in regaining her sanity.

However, Kusla answered her question unabashedly.

“The 3rd is the most malicious, the reason why devils are called devils. Then, what’s left after the 2nd enjoyment?”

Fenesis hesitated as she faced that icy face.

There was a large gaping hollow before this premise.

This might be the expression anyone of firm belief would show in the darkness.

“Right, a fetus.”

“...”

She did not lose her breath due to anger, and she did not gulp due to surprise.

She vomited.

Her body rejected this thought, and she was unwilling to understand it.

“The Placenta, Umbilical cord, the fetus itself, each of these items are ingredients used to make youth elixirs for eternal life since ancient times. Also, the first thing is to vivisect the abdomen while the mother is still alive...”

Kusla paused as Fenesis had covered the mouth of her pale face, her head lowered.

He nonchalantly stared at Fenesis, thinking it was enough.

He probably understood that Wayland was the embodiment of evil in Fenesis’ heart, the emissary of Hell, a mad alchemist of darkness and diabolism.

“Sorry, I might have gone overboard with the provocation. Are you alright?”

Fenesis did not look alright at all, but she adamantly nodded.

“But there are two things you can take solace in.”

“...?”

Due to the vomiting, tears were seeping out from Fenesis’ eyes, and she turned her beautiful gem-like eyes at Kusla.

“It was a few years ago when Wayland went on a rampage, attacking others like that. Because of God’s grace, he has more or less regained some humanity. Even so, the third desire is the only thing absent, and his first and second desires are still around. It’s better to watch out.”

Fenesis stared at Kusla seriously as the latter raised two fingers, and nodded her head.

“And also, the second thing is that I’m your ally.”

Kusla used the second-person pronoun ‘you’ he hardly used, and gave a smile.

Fenesis was dumbstruck for a moment, and finally showed an expression of relief, ostensibly having returned from Hell.

Kusla himself understood this relief, “*God Bless You!*” and thought this with realization.

“I... do not believe you.”

“Of course. It doesn’t matter, or rather, this has to be the case.”

“...Are you trying to run away from the issue?”

“Impossible. If you’re an idiot who believes me when I say that I’m your ally, you’ll be fooled by Wayland’s masquerade. In that case, I won’t be able to protect you. However, as long as you have eyes that suspect, a mind that think, a strong mettle to fight, and enough devotion, won’t you not discover the truth soon? I know which is correct, and God knows everything. There is only one truth, but many ways to find out. If we meet somewhere, we can hold hands and support each other. Am I wrong?”

“Am I wrong?” Upon hearing this, Fenesis widened her mouth as she stared at Kusla.

The eyes were full of hostility and wariness, but Kusla was relieved.

Those eyes were not looking at things they could not understand. They were at least human, within his understanding.

Why would humans feel a sense of familiarity with what they can understand?

And alchemists were of the complete opposite, despised by many.

"How about you drink some tea? This is something the nobles in the South are trying to popularize. It won't make you drunk like wine, it's nutritious, and is effective against illnesses. If the sea routes are opened, it'll become a very important trading commodity in the future."

Kusla reached his hand out to the silent Fenesis as he tried to advise her.

Fenesis looked at the tea, and then looked back at Kusla again.

The antagonistic intent in her eyes gradually vanished, and wariness was all that remained.

"She's so young." Upon seeing this, Kusla thought. It would be easy to fool her no matter how many times he wanted to.

Kusla was truly mystified, wondering what results the Choir was hoping for when they sent the girl here. However, he again realized that this was not the case.

She was probably the same as them.

Post's opinion was that the Choir would make use of Thomas' death and get involved. In that case, the Choir would assume Post would have set up a countering position. In that case, it would be a loss for the Choir to easily send outstanding personnel, only to be killed.

In that case, they would send in someone who would be obedient, but whose death would not be mourned over.

It would be best if she could find something, but if she was killed for some reason, they could use this as an excuse to cause trouble for Post.

Kusla drank his cup of tea and glanced at Fenesis. He felt it was impossible for the girl in front of him to understand this much, and from her studious attitude right from the beginning, it seemed she was thoroughly motivated as she was proud that such a great responsibility was tasked to her.

There is a high affinity between ignorance and fanaticism, and this is common in the world.

The silence in the room was abnormal.

A few minutes later, Fenesis was drinking the tea.

The common phrase of 'eating at the same table' means to trust the other party greatly.

He really wanted to tell her that she would have died if the tea was poisoned.

Because she was baited by this coaxing in this situation, he could not feel happy at all.

Kusla merely said something to close the distance between them, out of his sense of duty.

"Is it nice? It's just a similar gimmick, and I don't know if it has the same flavor as the one the nobles have."

"...Not bad."

It would be more appropriate to call her firm-willed rather than obstinate. Perhaps it was because she looked frail, both appearance-wise, and mentally.

"Speaking of which, I haven't introduced myself yet."

"..."

Fenesis put her cup down and stared at Kusla with wary eyes.

Or perhaps she always had such an expression.

“My name’s Kusla. I don’t know whether this is a good name or not.”

“Your real name?”

In response to the question, Kusla merely shrugged his shoulders.

“For an alchemist, there’s no such thing as a real name or what. An alchemist is a seeker of something that goes beyond what humans can do. That is not what a human can do; to someone straying off the right path, a human’s name is not needed. Once we die, our names won’t be engraved on the tombstone. We’re often thrown deep into the forest or in the wilderness; and for that case, there is even less of a reason to have a real name.”

He told Fenesis the slightly exaggerated truth, but the latter did not look very surprised.

She merely lowered her head to take a gulp of tea.

“So what is a non-human like you, {{Furigana|Interest|Kusla|margin=12}}, looking for?”

This question came with an intense stare of utmost concentration.

She wanted to give a sharp, stern, steel-like stare, but it felt more like an innocent stare suitable for city life either way.

“Iron.”

“Iron?”

“Right. I would say it’s more of metal than iron itself however. They give off a dullish glow, let out sparks when grinded, and let out a clank when hit. Recently, Wayland seemed to have gained an obsession over metals, and was called to this workshop with me. But his mind is still like that, just that his disease is headed for a different direction, thinking about some magic rocks or magic metal.”

The casual continual badmouthing of Wayland brought about Fenesis’ disgust and fear, and Kusla continued,

“Metals are pretty, and they’re like religious faith.”

“...Like, religious faith?”

“God never buried metals underground in their pure forms, and people used all sorts of methods to remove the impurities, refine them, and turn them into pure substances. This is a long arduous process; isn’t religious faith the same? To slowly remove the impurities and gradually approach the pure.”

“...It’s as you say.”

Fenesis was slightly hesitant, probably wondering what an alchemist was talking about.

“And then, one day, religious faith was elevated to something that was completely different. As for whether that was what God called humanity to do, this is something a non-religious like me doesn’t understand.”

“ ... ”

Fenesis did not answer, and her eyes showed signs of being overwhelmed and expectant.

“Perhaps he’s not as bad as I think he is.” This notion was clearly written on her face. Perhaps she was still not used to suspecting others.

Due to the difference in abilities, Kusla felt some remorse, a rarity for him.

Also, to an extent, obedience could be considered the single focus of religion.

Once there was a sense of familiarity, anyone would feel like favoring her.

Or rather, if this was the Choir's objective, she might be the perfect candidate in making others think this way.

"That was dangerous." Kusla thought.

"But I feel iron is the same. This is why I came here even though it's dangerous. Besides, it's a must to create strong iron for the Knights' call of acting in God's place."

"Changing the beliefs of pagans."

"Changing the beliefs of the hated pagans."

Kusla added on, and Fenesis suddenly tensed up.

She was a thorough believer in the orthodox Way, to a point where it was refreshing.

The people in the Choir definitely felt Fenesis was, without a doubt, in their complete control.

That was why, for Kusla, he had to be controlled even if he expected it .

"But there are a lot of difficulties awaiting us. I suppose we can combine our strength and work together."

Kusla said, and reached his right hand out.

However, Fenesis merely gave a glance, and did not reach her hand out.

"I'm your invigilator. I won't become like you."

She was certainly honest and pure. Even after Wayland groped her chest, even after she was exposed to danger, she definitely would not forget what she should do.

But this was not beyond a child obeying an adult's instructions.

Kusla continued to act as best as he could.

"I was too careless there. I don't want you to think that I'm trying to persuade you here."

Kusla pulled his hand back, and Fenesis closed her eyes, ostensibly about to nod.

"But, thank you for the hospitality. And..."

"And?"

"...I'm sorry for showing such an unsightly thing."

She did not want to say it, but she would have hated it if she did not say so.

Perhaps she had a habit of listening to God's servants who confessed and repented over their sins, or maybe it was an excuse she wanted for herself so that she could say so.

"No? I think that's a response to be expected."

"..."

"Are you comforting me?" Just when her eyes were showing signs of relief, there was shame and animosity. Perhaps Fenesis' ideal image was to have a pure, firm, steel-like believing heart of a Sister.

It was simply the dream of a girl whose seriousness was the only aspect that warrant merit.

At this point, Kusla felt the urge to protect rising in his heart. She gave off the innocent childish vibe that would make anyone think of protect her at all costs.

But at the same time, he felt foolish for treating the other party as an elite enemy soldier.

“Well, anyway.”

Kusla continued on like this, and Fenesis tensed her body due to anxiety.

Since she had a handle over the other party’s fate, she would nevertheless at ease even though it was some trivial matter.

It would at least be a consolation from this troublesome yet foolish mission.

“I’ll be in your care then, Sister Ul Fenesis.”

She was clearly relieved because of Kusla’s words, and was about to show a smile.

“Y-yes.”

And so, she adjusted her sitting posture, cleared her throat, and tried her best to look serious.

And since it was obvious she was trying to hide her feelings, just looking at this alone made him happy.

“But I’m your invigilator.”

“Of course.”

Kusla too barely managed to hide his emotions and said so with a serious look.

It was not uncommon to have someone watch over an alchemist.

Rather, it would be expected to send in an invigilator, as alchemists would carry out experiments that bystanders would not understand, experiments where they would risk their lives nonchalantly.

Of course, Kusla and Wayland have stepped over the line many times.

This would not be the first time a invigilator was sent to watch over them.

“This is basically how a workshop is like. It certainly is better not to step inside so carelessly, as there are dangerous things here, and they can be toxic when mixed together.”

For Kusla, who refused to have a tour through a workshop the first time he was brought to one, things seemed to be progressing smoothly for him.

For one, Fenesis, who made a round from the ground floor room, went down the stairs to the workshop, showed an unexpected affirming look. She had been giving suspicious looks at the various animal bones left behind by their predecessor, opaque jars and countless vials, but after a thorough explanation, the doubts vanished completely.

Besides, Fenesis should have some knowledge of the subject of alchemy, a requisite needed to be tasked with the role of an invigilator. However, it is obvious to see if there were pagan magic used if one were to compare the methods used with the books belonging to the priests with prestige.

“But Wayland is still the most dangerous of them all.”

Kusla whispered, and Fenesis curled her petite body.

Wayland was in the room with a furnace and water wheel below them.

But even so, when making a round through the workshop, Fenesis definitely would not pull her distance from Kusla.

Her feelings were like an adventurer on an Odyssey through Hell in an epic written by a great poet.

“So basically, what we do here is that we increase the quality of iron here, and research on refining iron with lesser fuel. Just as God positioned people that looked different all over the land, the rocks buried underground will have different characteristics due to the differences in land quality. What we’re looking into is the best method to extract them from the rocks dug up from the ground.”

“...”

It was said one of the rules in a priest’s life was silence.

Fenesis was being just as that, and did not make even the slightest sound as she listened to Kusla seriously.

Or rather, she probably felt something bad would enter her mouth if she spoke up in the workshop, but either way, it made the job of the one explaining very easy.

“But this is really a good workshop.”

It was the first time Kusla entered this workshop as he showed Fenesis around, and he inadvertently expressed this thought.

The workshop below had a lot more items inside than the one upstairs, and on first glance, it was impossible to determine what items were inside, and where they were located.

What suddenly appeared in his eyes were obvious items like an animal skull hanging on a wall, a scale balance, a crucible, crystals bits and a celestial globe. On a closer look, one would understand that they were positioned logically, like a mini-universe.

All the items were tidied and sorted out. Even a novice could know what type of objects they were given the relevant knowledge.

This was the reason why he could explain everything to Fenesis so easily.

But Kusla remained silent as he looked at this workshop for a while, because he felt pathos at this.

“...?”

“Ah, sorry. I was thinking the predecessor was really a capable person.”

“...”

It seemed the name was Thomas Blanket.

Though it was said he was killed in the city, the cause of death was still uncertain.

Even after Friche’s was killed, and her body was mutilated, Kusla merely thought about alchemy. However, there was a damp feeling rising in his body.

A highly skilled alchemist had gone.

In other words, there was one less comrade doing the bad things hidden from God’s sights.

If possible, Kusla wanted to have a chat once.

It was probable that the name Thomas Blanket was simply a borrowed name, and nobody knew where he came from. There was no grave, and a few years later, nobody would remember this name. What he left behind was simply this workshop and the alchemy knowledge, and since Kusla and Wayland moved into this workshop right away, it would inadvertently become something that used to belong to him.

And the method of refining iron he painstakingly obtained would also be ostensibly a thing of the past; it would simply be trodden upon as an antique, one people would ignore.

This was the fate that awaited alchemists.

Alchemists would not leave anything behind.

What would be left behind was merely a trivial fact, that someone once advanced towards Magdala.

"However, I suppose most of the amazing alchemists end up like Wayland."

Kusla pretended to joke as he said this, but Fenesis showed a disgusted expression.

"In that sense, I am a Second-rate as an alchemist."

"..."

This line could either be interpreted as that of humility or overwhelming confidence.

Fenesis too noticed the play of words here, and gave a startled stare.

It seemed she was fairly smart.

Kusla did not dislike smart girls.

"How about Wayland's work? I feel that he should be the one I need to invigilate."

And he showed an honest troubled look in response to those words.

It seemed she was really terrified and revolted of Wayland.

"But if you trust me, can't I just report everything to you?"

"..."

After Fenesis lowered her head, showed a serious expression, and pondered for a while, she answered briefly,

"Please assist me when I make sudden checks from time to time."

She gave such a punchline as a reason, but it was similar to telling someone to accompany her to the latrine at night.

He did not laugh, but he had a slight urge to tease her.

"Understood."

Their Supervisor Post wholeheartedly accepted the flattering praise that was filled with condescendence and insolence within before, but Fenesis glared back immediately once she knew he was teasing her.

There was an overwhelming difference in tolerance.

Kusla pretended not to notice Fenesis' stare.

"This is how a workshop is. You can voice out about anything you want to know about when we get down to actual work, and I'll accompany you during the sudden checks."

"..."

"I'm not looking down on you. Or rather, it's for your own good to call for me when you watch us."

"...That...as expected..."

It seemed she was unable to restrain her curiosity, and wanted to ask. "I suppose it's different from what you think the reason is." but Kusla said,

"In an experiment, we might end up creating deadly gas that may be invisible to the eyes, undetectable to the nose, and will make you lose consciousness if you breathe it in."

"Eh."

"The hand of the Death God. It is something that often appears when burning coal."

Kusla placed his hand on the bear skull hanging on the wall, stroked it, and continued,

"When extracting metals, we will use poisons that will render us conscious just from a single touch. However, we do not extract those materials, mercury-type materials for instance, for their poison. Even if the poisons aren't that powerful, weak toxins will accumulate in us if we ingest food without washing our hands after touching such materials. For example, lead, arsenic..."

Kusla folded his fingers as he counted, and as she watched the fingers bend down, Fenesis' expression was akin to watching a pillar supporting the sky snap.

"I-I understand."

"Ah, for us, there's too many dangerous things we have to make clear to you rather than hide from you. If the Invigilator dies, we will be the ones suspected. We have nothing to if we're killed because we really killed you, but we'll really hate it if we're to be hanged because you died on your own like that."

"..."

It made sense logically, but Fenesis showed a complicated expression.

With so many poisons around her, there was a high chance of her dying randomly, even as compared to the chances of her being killed. This felt more realistic than all the exaggerated rumors regarding alchemists she heard of.

"And one more thing."

"?"

"You have to eat after us."

Fenesis tilted her head, ostensibly unable to understand.

"Even if I don't betray you, Wayland might end up killing you."

"!"

"Another possibility is that someone we don't know of is trying to poison us. However, we can taste the poison if there is any in our food, so you must not eat before us. Even when you eat, do so in my presence, or if you have any courage, eat with Wayland and take whatever's in his plate."

Nobody will risk their lives to eat secretly.

These were the words clearly written on Fenesis' tight-lipped face.

But Kusla was not completely joking when he said that. Originally, if Fenesis were to die at this place, they would definitely seize upon the opportunity to pursue Post because of the sacrificial pawn's contribution. The logic was, *The killer is the alchemist under your charge, so you have to bear responsibility*. In that case, there was a chance Fenesis' superior would poison her food.

It seems I have to watch her condition and health, Kusla was a little disappointed.

Even if there were no issues with eating at this place, they would have no such luck anywhere else. If someone poisoned her with sulphur at a different place, there was no way they could prove their innocence.

The strength of a chain is determined by the weakest component.

In other words, Fenesis was more of an entity sharing the same fate as them, rather than Kusla and Wayland's enemy. They had to protect this overly weak enemy like a comrade.

The Alchemists' teaching that everything will change applies everywhere.

There was nothing eternal. The moment one heave a sigh of relief and open his eyes, he would find himself living in Hell.

Kusla thought as he went up the steps, and the moment he looked back, he found that Fenesis had stopped in her tracks.

"Have you...always lived this lifestyle?"

It took him a little while, but he finally realized it was a continuation of the previous conversation.

Fenesis, who was looking down from above, resembled a pagan.

"Of course. It has always been like this, and will remain like this."

He shrugged and returned to the first level.

As she followed from behind, Fenesis seemed to be pondering deeply over something.

Perhaps she was amazed by the alchemists.

"Half of an alchemist's job is done in the workshop below, and the other half is done in the city."

"Eh?"

"The alchemists who can't develop good relationships with the craftsmen in the city are third-rate. It may be surprising, but those who aren't adept at socializing can't become alchemists."

Fenesis was startled for a moment, as she felt that was impossible.

Kusla however chuckled,

"Our job, especially those related to metals, are basically repetitions of the experiments the craftsmen can't do because of how busy they are every day. However, their craftsmanship is really amazing. Our results will be left on paper, but theirs won't, and they won't have the time to do so. That's why we ask them and learn from them. That Wayland too looks like a decent person when he goes to the craftsmen. Speaking of which, our lives will be in danger if we offend them. Craftsmen workshops are not as peaceful as it is here; If we do anything stupid, we'll have anvils smashed on our heads or get burned by the pokers. They definitely won't do lenient things like poisoning or assassination, but they'll dump any fool who decides to steal from them into the furnace for example. Even the judiciary folks in the city won't know if that was an accident or homicide. Also, the high heat of the furnace can burn even bones to dust, and they can pretend nothing happens. In other words,"

Fenesis was overwhelmed by the atmosphere as Kusla described the situation, and the moment he said the last words and raised a finger, her eyes were attracted to it like a cat.

"In other words, this world is filled with danger, and is completely different from the monastery."

Fenesis then nodded in response to the finger that was curled back.

Perhaps she did not truly understand the meaning behind those words, but he did not have a duty to teach her.

He stared at Fenesis, and could not resist the urge as he raised her chin.

It felt as enjoyable as teasing a kitten.

He shrugged his shoulders, and took his coat.

However, Fenesis spoke up, slightly flustered.

This would probably be a classic example of wanting to know one's destination beforehand.

"Erm, where are we going?"

"The sunset bell's going to ring soon, right? I need to greet the craftsmen before then. It'll be troublesome if they're unhappy because I didn't greet them immediately."

"..."

It might be hard to imagine anyone who could force the terrifying alchemists to kowtow.

"Then, what do you intend to do?"

"Eh?"

"Can you watch the house alone?"

Of course, she was clearly infuriated as she understood the meaning behind his words, but naturally, these words were said to tease her. It would be boring not to see such a reaction.

"Do not worry."

"Oh my?"

She said so with a relaxed tone, but it was surprising she could still remain calm even as she was going to be alone with Wayland.

"Someone will come fetch me when the sunset bell rings."

It was still fine if she remained alone for such a short while.

Kusla shrugged slightly.

"Ah, I think you should understand, but don't touch anything weird."

"That...yes."

"Be a good girl and read the books."

"Eh?"

Fenesis showed a temporal moment of surprise as she stared at Kusla.

Concerned by that response, he put his hand on the door and looked back.

"What is it?"

"Ah, it's nothing..."

Fenesis tried to correct her words and avert her gaze as she tentatively lifted her eyes at Kusla.

"I can, read them?"

"Huh?"

He did not understand the context of this question. Perhaps it was an issue of religion here.

"Ah...it's fine. There's nothing that defies the Church's teachings. Your compatriots have already checked through them."

"..."

"However, do remember these are all high valued stuff. Don't drool all over them."

"!!"

Fenesis pouted, and Kusla did not bother with her any further as he opened the door.

The outside was dyed a dark red, and it was extremely cold. Before he closed the door, he glanced behind, and found Fenesis staring at the shelves repleted with books with a jubilant expression. He recalled she was reading books when he arrived with Wayland. *I guess this is to be expected of a well-cultured Sister after all.*

He proceeded down the slope leading to the harbor as he remained in his thoughts, and brushed past a group riding on a carriage.

There were 3 horses walking side by side, and the head of the middle horse was covered with embroidery with gold and silver lines on its head, a costly coat fluttering along his neck. On its saddle, there was an old man cloaked completely in black robes.

His stare was facing forward unflinchingly.

And remained as such even as Kusla obviously entered his sights.

There is no way there can be any obstacles in my path.

The man's expression clearly betrayed such a notion, and the iron-masked monastery knights flanking him assured this was not a delusion.

This was the Choir belonging to the Knights.

Kusla side-stepped to allow the carriage to pass by. Certainly, there was no doubt they recognized Kusla's face, and their stares were focused forward.

His prankster mindset was inciting him to get in their path, but he was not so foolish as to do such a thing without checking the situation inside the city.

And so, Kusla did not walk down the slope, but turned behind to look at them. They stopped in front of the workshop, and a knight poked the door with his spear. Fenesis appeared from there with her head lowered, ostensibly begging for mercy.

They then proceeded in the direction away from the port, and of course, Fenesis was the only one walking.

This might be a given in the monastery's strict legislation regarding hierarchy, but the scene resembled that of a human trafficker and a slave trader. *No, this might be the case*, he thought again. The Choir deliberately chose to invite her with such formal equipment, probably anticipating any unforeseen scenarios, or perhaps they were hoping for such a situation to happen.

Such hideous folks. He murmured as he spat on the path.

The Church's evening bell rang at that moment, and a day's work was coming to an end.

All cities and towns had to abide by the bell, as long as the Church exists. No matter how many city councils the Knights control, this was the final bastion they could not break down.

With this as the signal, the city ostensibly heave a sigh of relief after a long day's worth of work, and all regular activities and stalls lined on both sides of the streets started to pack up.

Despite this, the city was a lot livelier as the city folk passed by each other, those who were headed home, and those who were not done with their work. The spear-wielding city guards were patrolling around, maintaining the security of the city, resulting in congestion and shoving amongst the citizens. However, they quickly filled the gaps, becoming a human flow akin to a highly viscous liquid.

This is really amazing. He thought.

Soon after, he arrived at a large building 5 levels tall, with a pickaxe and lantern coat of arms carved out from it. Kusla did not know the geography of the city, but he would not be lost given the fact that

the city's structure is similar all around. The liveliest streets and bustling locations in the city would always be occupied by those with authority.

He looked around for a little while, and found the Knights' building, where Post resided, a block away from him.

Unlike the world of stone smoldering under the land, the rationale behind the human world was a lot simpler.

Kusla easily leapt 3 steps up the stone steps, and without using the knocker, immediately pushed aside the heavy wooden door.

The Blacksmiths' Guild too would have a similar layout, no matter what town it was. The first floor was a large space built to accommodate important meetings and internal arbitration. Normally, the workers would have breakfast at this place before dawn, and from dusk till night, this would quickly become a bar once work was over. They would have their meals and alcohol, and no matter how boisterous or raucous, it would simply be an internal matter for them.

But at this timing, in this large room, the chairs were still overturned and placed on the tables, and the candles were still not lit. The floor was polished neatly, and the shiny black color let out a chilling light.

"Is there anyone inside?"

Kusla tapped his heel several times, and heard echoes all over the room. Then, a voice finally came.

"Dickens? Hasn't your workshop closed at this time ye—"

A lady with her sleeves rolled up walked out from the interior room, holding what looked like a heavy bucket in both hands.

"Hm? Who are you?"

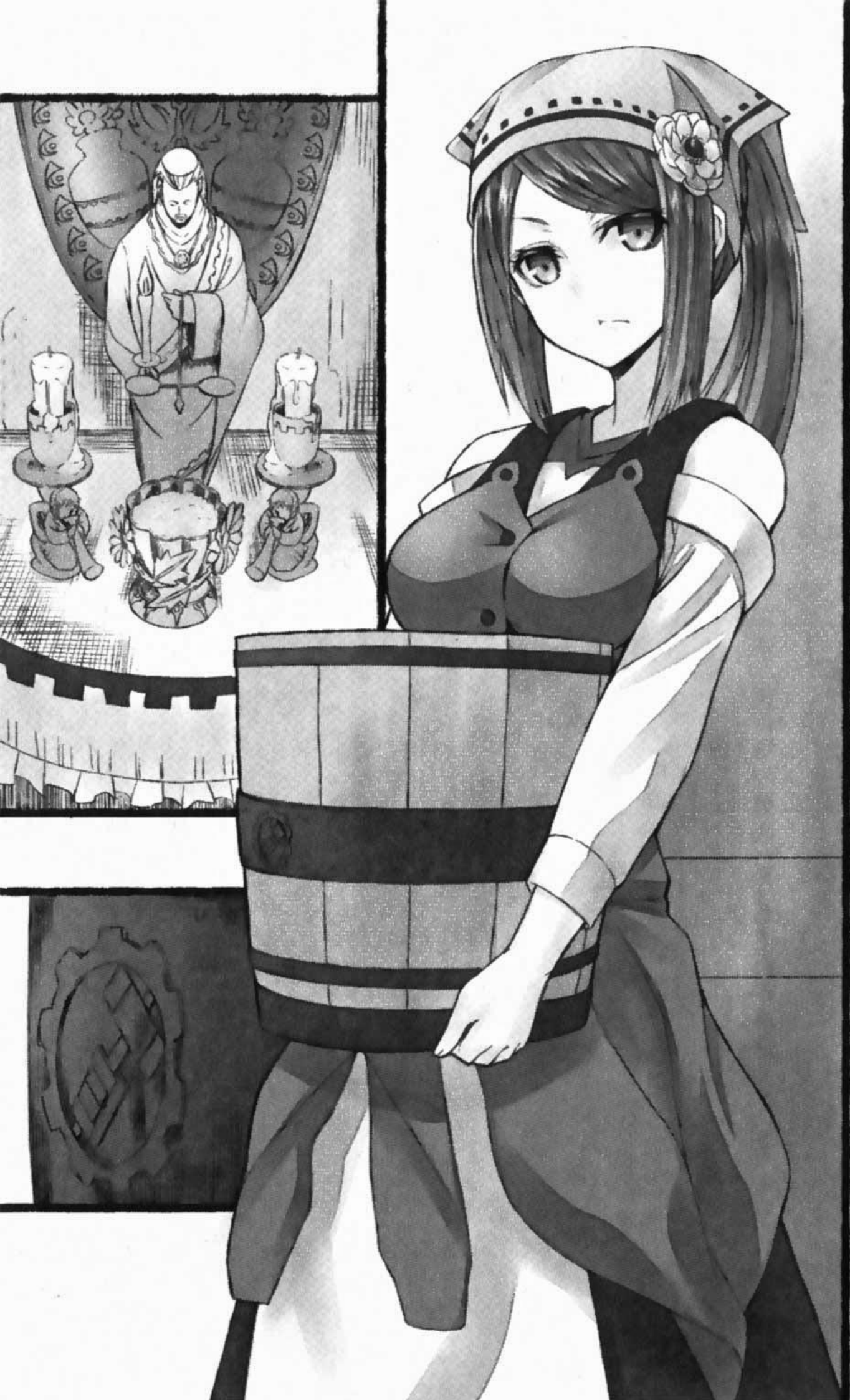
"I'll like to meet your Leader."

Kusla said as he stared at the parchments laid out on the wall. These parchments list all the special privileges the council has granted the Guild, and the large number of parchments clearly showed the prestige in the town.

"May I know what your intention is?"

The lady placed the bucket aside with a loud thud, and one could tell from the sound that this really was not heavy. The lady looked young, but her slender body showed no signs of effeminacy from her, and one could feel her bravery from the handkerchief wrapped on her head.

She did give the vibe matching a Metalworks guild, and the long red hair reaching out from under the handkerchief was as messy as a sailor's, but gave a sense of reliability.



“Ahh.”

The lady took off her handkerchief and wiped the sweat of her head as she said,

“So you're the one.”

“?”

Kusla raised his chin, expressing his doubt, but the lady did not continue. She let down her rolled sleeves as she walked to the small altar used for prayers to the guardian saints. She then placed a thin stick into a small pot, and lit the candle on the side.

As to be expected of a Craftsmen Guild, it seemed they had prepared a firestarter beside the altar.

“You are the new incoming alchemist, am I correct?”

“No need for the long talk. Now then, where is the Guild leader?”

Kusla again asked, and the lady continued to hold the candle and light the lamps on the wall as she answered without looking back.

“That would be me.”

“...Oh my?”

Kusla deliberately invoked this tone, but he was certainly startled by this fact.

Then, the lady shot a glance over her shoulder for the first time, showing what seemed a lethargic stare.

“I am Irine Brunner, deputy for Robert Brunner, caretaker of the Blacksmith Guild.”

I see. Kusla raised his chin slightly and stared at the lady who introduced herself as Irine.

“I see. Pardon me then.”

“Not really. I too do not feel suited for this role, but nobody else is willing to take up this role.”

“What about Mr Robert Brunner?”

“He went on a long journey.”

This meant that he had passed away.

In other words, Irine was a young widow.

It was likely no new leader was appointed as they wanted to avoid any disputes.

“Then, I shall address you as Miss Irine then.”

Kusla placed his right hand on his left shoulder and gave a formal bow; though he appeared respectful, he was a little contemptuous within.

“I am an alchemist affiliated to the Knights, and I come here without a name and without a home, only skills. I hope, for the sake of the Knights, crusaders of God who aim to bring justice to the land, and for the sake of the almighty God’s name, to get the maximum efforts of Gulbetty’s Metalworks guild.”

Kusla added a little theatric in his act as he remained adamant not to let it break apart.

His work in the future would be affected if he were belittled, and this was a definite rule that could not be broken in any town. After praying to God to a point of embarrassment, he would have to follow a shockingly cumbersome process to finish the contract.

No matter how much a mentor hoped to gain assistants, if he wanted to take in a new disciple, he would have to let this disciple stay outside the door for 3 days and 3 nights. Of course, he would have to take care of the disciples' meals and sanitary needs, and in the night, he also had to usher the disciple into the workshop and issue bedding to him. This was a tradition that had to be kept.

"Lend you our maximum effort, huh?"

After lighting the lamps, Irine puffed the flame off the extremely long candle in her hand, walked back to the altar, and smiled.

"We are the ones who need assistance."

However, Irine actually said such a thing.

"...I really am troubled by such direct words"

"At the previous town, I really scoffed at those alchemists."

"..."

Even the Knights could not control all the cities.

Also, the blacksmiths, who work for a living, would have better experience in the field of Metalworks. Also, there was a vast difference in iron content in different regions, and even an experienced alchemist could not match that of a local blacksmith's. For cities with powerful Guilds, the forestalling of an alchemist's materials was a common sight, and certainly, it was not rare to see even the backers of an alchemist end up powerless.

Thus, it was a tradition for an alchemist to kowtow to the workers when he arrives at a new town. This way, he could obtain skills, knowledge and materials, and the new techniques derived thereafter would be repayment to the craftsmen. This is despite it being a mere expression of formality.

At the very least, this was a tradition passed down for generations.

"Because of the Knights' Crusade, business has been incessant. Even at this time, the Guild house remains empty."

The floor and walls were well polished, and the candles looked new.

If it were another Guild, this would be the moment where a banquet would start. However, there was nary a craftsman to be seen here.

"Because of the exceptional benevolence the Knights showed us, the issue regarding the lack of students is mitigated somewhat, and most of the immigrants in this city have joined our Guild. There are 130 mentors, 500 disciples, and if we count their families, there are more than 1000 of us here. Thanks to the Knights, we're not starving at this point. They had been assisting us in all aspects, from the obtaining of raw materials to the selling of goods, you know? Do you know they even provided the funds for the addition construction of the waterwheel and the furnace at the workshop? There'll be punishment on us if I begrudge our lords from the Knights."

Irine sat on the Guild leader's massive stone seat at the desk, and her considerably massive body for a woman looked somewhat petite on it.

Perhaps it could be said that even if there was a veteran bearded blacksmith with a chiseled body, his body would appear small in the face of the Knights' overwhelming finances, and had to remain silent as a result.

A craftsman would need money if he wants to showcase his skills. If he wants to pull any town immigrants to his factory, he would have to win the tussle for authority against the other Blacksmiths Guilds, and to win, money would be imperative.

The construction of the waterwheel and furnace too would be nearly impossible to complete alone. To put it simply, a city could only allow a fixed number of waterwheels; thus, there would be disputes

with others over the privilege to use them. How did one keep them quiet? By paying them off, of course.

In the face of such issues, the Knights could give the final say by using its overwhelmingly massive fortunes. To win the war, weapons, shielding and tools needed to fight sieges were needed.

"If I refuse your assistance, I will probably be cut to bits."

"The Knights sure are shady, but I do not think they are this primitive."

"No. I'm talking about the craftsmen."

Irine said as her face showed a slight teasing smile.

This woman really has guts for choosing an alchemist as someone she can vent her frustrations on. Kusla thought.

"One of these days, the Northern cities will fall, so will there not be a new influx of immigrants? Everyone is starting to save up their wealth to show their loyalty to the Knights. After a thorough discussion, everyone agreed that our Guild's directive in the future is to give our all for the noble alchemist."

Irine took out a bundle of parchment scrolls from under the table and tossed it onto the table.

Kusla was taken aback, and Irine grinned.

Normally, a craftsman would not record his techniques in the form of writing. The secrets passed down within the workshop had to be different from the others. Thus, seeing how she prepared parchments with records on them, it seemed the craftsmen were already prepared to enter the new world.

They would even let the Workers Guild, originally an independent entity, let themselves be called maidservants of the Knights.

"Now do you understand the reason why I'm sitting on this chair even in this situation?"

Irine, slumped deeply within her seat, gave a spiteful smile at Kusla as she said. It seemed she was so nonchalant even when facing Kusla not because she was gutsy.

But because she had given up on everything.

"Just an empty vessel."

"You sure are direct, aren't you?"

"An alchemist has to seek truth."

Kusla reached his hand out for the parchment bundles, and a unique odor gently entered his nostrils. "Of course." He said.

Having obtained this, there was no reason for him to remain here any longer.

He tucked the parchments under his armpit, and just as he was about to head back, he suddenly thought of something.

"What kind of person was my predecessor Thomas?"

Thomas' cause of death was investigated by Post and the Church, and he did not ask this question for the sake of investigating, but simply out of curiosity.

Or perhaps, because of Friche's death, he was able to feel some empathy for a person's death.

"He's a serious and just man who seeks the truth."

She simply shrugged, ostensibly making an insinuation.

However, one could tell from the tidiness of the workshop that this remark was not too far from the truth.

“...So I cannot lose to my predecessor here, right?”

“This will affect our profits, so please put in your efforts in the refining of iron.”

Kusla gave a slight smile, and left the Guild house.

He closed the huge heavy door, took a few steps, and heard what sounded akin to a slam from the inside.

There are people who are pressured by this sort of huge pressure everywhere, to the brink of collapse.

However,

“Only I...”

Can drown like this.

And so, he buried this secret in his heart, and walked to the workshop in the city under the setting sun.

Upon arriving back at the workshop, Kusla found Wayland in the underground room, weighing the metals on a scale.

"How are the workers~?"

"Not an issue. It seems the Guild works closely with the Knights. Look at this."

He placed the parchments on the workdesk,, and Wayland too was surprised by this.

"Hehe~? So they are willing to sacrifice their dignity in exchange for profits?"

"Whatever dignity can be regained once they become the first to reach the new world and build up their power."

"The Knights are really good at uncovering people's desires, huh~"

Wayland said as he ruffled through the parchments, and then set them aside in an uninterested manner.

"Anyway, I don't think our predecessor Thomas died foolishly like what we heard."

"Oh?"

This time, Kusla was the one who asked.

"I checked on the items left behind in this workshop, and the purity of the ingots are shockingly high. The purity is higher than the standard ingots I brought from my previous workshop. It is exasperating, to be honest. However, iron sand isn't the only thing that can be mined in this region; there are a lot of inferior ores filled with sulfur and lots of other. If these are ingots refined from that kind of iron, that method he used is practically magic. There's no way the blacksmiths in town can do this."

"Magic..."

"It feels like the Devil's work, like it was made by some Divine work. That is..."

Wayland looked up at the ceiling, and said,

"Maybe he is a resident of Magdala."

"!"

Kusla gulped. For an alchemist, Magdala was a unique term, a place all alchemists aimed to reach.

Wayland's skills were better than Kusla even though they were fellow peers in the field of alchemy, and thus, he would take this term more seriously. If he were to say it, it meant that it was not a joke.

"This might be the reason why that oaf Post chose to lock up this place and not tidy it up even if the Choir has to keep an eye on him. If that man is able to make such high quality ingots, his standing must be high up there or something."

"But he just can't find where the technique records are hidden. This is why the situation is as such."

Alchemists would never record their findings on parchment, and most of choose to leave their records in a corner of the building. They could not predict what would happen, and may end up being eliminated for political reasons. For that reason, they would leave their findings in the furnace, roof beams, or under the floor tiles. Sometimes, they would even leave their results in the form of codes.

"Once he knows the technique, he can ignore the Choir's interference, demolish the workshop, build another one somewhere else, and produce iron in masses while being heavily protected. I guess this is the reason why the workshop here is not demolish. This place might be the crux to solving the code, and then, we will be able to see Thomas' refined techniques and how diligent he was."

"Hm?"

"I did a rough look through of the records that are left behind, and they are all in codes."

The symbols used could only be understood by alchemists, and astrology knowledge was added as a distraction.

"It might be a little forced to treat this as blaspheming God ...anyway, I guess the structure is that the results of each metal purifying will be used as a code written at the back end. Every time there is a development, he will use the records before to create a code and make it difficult for others to take what he achieved. I guess he was killed after he made that shockingly pure iron, and did not even have the time to make a proper conclusion."

"In other words, that means..."

Kusla muttered, and Wayland's lips showed a spiteful smile as he nodded.

"If we want to find out how to make iron with such purity, we need to go back to the start, follow Thomas' footsteps, and find out where did he make the mistake. There is no way an ordinary alchemist can do this. I guess we are not just simple sacrificial pawns after all."

This certainly was a delightful conceited mindset.

This was an excitement that could not be felt outside the battlefield, to remind oneself his abilities are being tested while his life is on the brink.

And as alchemists, there was reason for them to be excited.

"I really look forward to seeing if we can find out the true identity of this magic, no matter how the process is like."

"Ohoho."

Wayland laughed, got up, and leaned his body over the table as if he was whispering.

"However,"

And so, he said,

"It might not be too much of an exaggeration when that oaf Post said that he allows us to use our poison and assassination skills to protect ourselves."

The tone Wayland used was akin to talking about the next day's weather when he said this.

Kusla looked around for a little moment, and shrugged.

"No matter the reason, this is an alchemist who is outstanding enough to be killed."

"Yeah. An overly strong mercenary may be killed not only by his enemies, but also his employer. It will be troublesome if he revolts. If the Church gets this technique...and I guess this is the reason. If the production of iron can be controlled, the Church will catch in in the war to purge the pagans."

"Certainly a lot of enemies here. Got to remember this."

Kusla pretended to joke about as he raised his fingers and started counting at them.

"Something smells fishy about this choice of personnel. I guess it will not fall short of our expectations here."

Wayland let out a slight snort, and stroked his beard slightly as he raised an eyebrow, saying.

"Take note of your surroundings and watch out for more details than anyone else. If you keep remaining in the workshop, you will not realize that the city is occupied by the enemy."

"The story of Auripedes, huh?"

Auripedes was a man from an ancient kingdom, hailed as an inventor, but was more of a forefather to alchemy.

It was said he was overly obsessed with his experiments, and even when bathing, as long as he had an inspiration, he would go naked and run about on the streets, making a weird sound. Even his death was due to a random soldier chopping him when he was solving geometrical questions on the floor. At that time, the enemy had occupied the city, and when the enemy soldier asked for his name, he was furious that the former interrupted his thoughts, and actually argued back furiously. As a result, he was unable to protect himself in time.

The tragedy of a man who lived more than a thousand years ago lingered on till now, for there was probably still a lesson worth learning from.

In this era, a fool like him would never be a good alchemist.

"That Missy too obviously looks very unnatural."

Kusla changed the topic to Fenesis, and Wayland's understanding was probably the same.

"I feel that your worry is not unwarranted, Kusla. Acting alone will not be the reason why someone is being so tense."

But in regards to Wayland's words, Kusla could only look over with a weary attitude.

"...How many times have you done that already to attain such understanding?"

"Hm? This method is very effective on those without boyfriends, you know~? It is just that they will continue to remember about me for a while, whether out of anger, or out of fear. And once their minds are thinking about me, they are mine. After that, I just need to show her my sincerity, my conquest is complete, and they will not feel so tense."

From a human perspective, a person who would frivolously call this sincerity was a scum of the highest order, but as a man, he might be someone worthy of respect.

"But considering that we are being viewed as expendable pawns, we certainly are not thinking too much."

"Correct. This is a workshop with two grown men living here, you know~. It is already a mistake to leave a nun here, and we cannot deny something might happen no matter how much we try to prevent it. Though it seems that you are not willing to do this, Kusla."

"You really are a beast."

"Surely not ~ this is the act of comforting something you love."

Kusla himself felt such thoughts and actions were vile enough. However, anyone saint that would be deemed as weak, so he chose not to press the matter.

"But in practice, that cod is in charge of watching over you, Kusla. I will leave her to you then."

Kusla glared back, but Wayland have a nonchalant look, pretending to be inattentive.

"All because someone pushed the job offer to me. I will show you."

"I hope so. There is a lot of things to do starting tomorrow. You will get in my way if you loiter around like this."

Wayland stood up, his hands on his hips as he glanced around.

"This is an alchemist's workshop, my country."

"Then what about me?"

Kusla asked, and in response, Wayland merely chuckled and shrugged.

On the next day, just as Kusla was about to head out, he sensed someone walking in circles at the front of the workshop.

Through experience, one could tell whether it was someone who just happened to pass by, or someone trying to look inside the workshop.

Obviously, it was the latter, but this person's skills were very lacking.

Kusla wanted to ignore the person, for it works be a halls to chase him away. He however clearly saw who the person was when the latter tried to peek through the shutter gap.

At this point, it was impossible for Kusla to try and act calm; it was more impossible for him to do so when the person knocked on the door and walked in.

Appearing at the door was Fenesis, who was thoroughly worn out.

She was probably a little lost, wondering if it was Kusla or Wayland inside.

.

If she knew her trail of thought was seen through, what will her expression be like?

Kusla wondered as he let the petite Fenesis into the house and walk below his chin.

"What...is with this?"

He wanted to pretend to remain calm, but Fenesis did not seem to realize this at all. She removed the coat over the robes, and soon after, was taken aback by the item on the table.

"I want to replicate the work orderliness the previous owner showed."

It does not matter even if other know of this. Kusla thought as he said this honestly. It would be harder for him to do work if he made a flimsy lie that would be seen through easily, and if it were seen through. Normally, no lie would bring good results unless there was a need to lie.

"...Huh?"

But Fenesis' answer was a little vague. There were stones and powder filled in little vessels of all shapes and sizes, laid out in front of the parchment on the table. There were also drawings of tools and

stars on it, and the words gave a sense of stateliness. On first glance, it must be something related to magic or something.

But if it were a magic ritual, it would probably be a little more systematic, or in a certain sense, more aesthetically appealing.

Fenesis seemed to be at a loss of what to do, looking like she was wondering if she could prepare some sweets for many guests that would be coming in, rather than because there was a suspicious odor coming from the items laid out on the table.

"Do not sneeze here. If you breathe in the powder that flies up, you may die."

"Ah!"

Upon hearing that, Fenesis frantically covered her mouth with her sleeve, but upon seeing Kusla, she frowned.

"Are you alright?"

Kusla did not answer this muffled voice, and merely shrugged and smiled.

"...Please do not make such a joke in future."

"But it is true that I do not want you to sneeze. This is such perfectly ground powder made after an entire night's worth of work. Wayland will go crazy if he has to do it again."

"Uu...I will pay attention to that."

Using Wayland as a dismotivation certainly worked like a charm.

"Then...why are you dressed up like this?"

After hearing Kusla's explanation, Fenesis stared curiously at the items laid out on the table, and then stared at Kusla with a confounded expression as the latter was dressed in a coat.

"I am going to a market."

"Eh?"

"There are still some things we lack, and if I go to the market, I might be able to buy various useful things. I am a little concerned about leaving Wayland behind in the workshop, but it is great to have such a good inspector help out."

Kusla grinned as he said this to Fenesis, but the latter paled, indicating her refusal.

"Er, erm? Eh?"

"Before I go, let me notify you of some things to take note of. It is still fine if there is a stench resembling that of rotten eggs, but if you smell anything similar to crushed rocks, or if there is black smoke appearing from the furnace chimney, hold your breath, quickly run outside, and run to the Baggage Corps' headquarters. It is very likely that asphalt is being burned. I told you before, during the introduction to this workshop, that the hand of the Death God may reach out for you any time. Once you breathe in it, some colorless and odorless gases will take take your life away. In that situation, call some people here immediately to stop Wayland's madness; anyway, whether the town becomes a town of death...it will depend on what you do."

Kusla patted Fenesis on the shoulder with a serious expression, ostensibly saying that there was really a Death God; in response, Fenesis glanced at the shoulder gingerly.

"Then, I will leave this to you."

Kusla thought she would at least hold in her emotions for a while, but the moment he turned around, her hand was already tugging at his coat.

"..."

Kusla stopped and turned his head around to look; Fenesis immediately recovered and released her hand flusteredly.

Please do not leave me here. However, this was what her eyes were saying.

"What is it?"

Kusla asked, and Fenesis shrank back. This habit of hers caused her to be unable to say anything, especially when she was almost completely overwhelmed by fear and anxiety.

This was probably a pretense on this invigilator's part, but her ability to hide her expression was completely gone. It seemed she would be terrified at the prospect of being left alone with Wayland.

Kusla naturally knew that Fenesis would be terrified, but upon seeing her in this sense, he started to feel a little gloomy, rather than the delight that would have resulted from teasing her.

It seemed, certainly, that the appearance of one trembling in fear from walking to a guillotine would be different from the appearance of one terrified of entering the latrine.

But though she said she was scared of using the latrine, it would be troubling in the future if she got clumsy because she was overly timid.

Kusla sighed slightly and said,

"Did the higher-ups order you to watch me?"

"Nn."

Fenesis was practically grabbing onto the last ounce of straw offered to her as she affirmed this statement.

Kusla tried his best to look unwilling, and Fenesis used this chance to ostensibly regain some pride as an invigilator. She showed the expression of a drowning person who touched the bottom of a lake, trying her best to to gain self-confidence.

"I am ordered to watch over you."

Her green irises remained unnaturally still.

Kusla shrugged, "Whatever", and answered.

Gulbetty had always been a port city. Even when the Church had not formally clashed with the Pagans, it was an era where they still respected each other after all.

But at this point, this had become a drawbridge leading to the frontmost warzone line against the Pagans, a powerful symbol showing the Pagans the existence of God.

In this town, one could find many mercenaries and knights strolling around, and many shops that were built to indulge them. On the other hand, there were also homicidal clergymen who did not want to linger around in the Church, and that they felt the battlefield was a place to test their faith.

Since early in the morning, there would be people performing with musical instruments, people drinking away while creating ruckus, and roaming evangelists preparing to start on their journeys; such a scene was not that common.

But Kusla did like this sort of hodgepodge atmosphere.

In this place, malicious acts could be deemed as good deeds, and vice versa.

In other cities, all moneymaking acts deemed as vile would be denounced, but at this place, things were completely different; they were be rationalized for being a mean to finance the war against the

Pagans. Not only that, but as long as they earn money, even if it meant trading with Pagans, it would be deemed as robbing wealth from the Pagans.

A running theme in this place was that if there were some varying circumstances, there would be an unfamiliar outcome. This was utterly similar to the acts of the Alchemists, and one could say this town itself was a smelting pot of alchemy.

Kusla and Wayland were sent to the local workshop partly as criminals, and this scenario would be a good chance for them to a certain extent. For once, they could return to a place where they could refine metal.

"Then, where do you plan to go to?"

Fenesis frowned as she glanced aside at some savage mercenaries, who were blindfolded as they threw knives at some bottles on the wine barrels, making a huge commotion.

Right now, if I point out that she has been timid up till just now, her face will be flushed red, and she will probably snap back at me while looking like she is ready to bite me.

"Did you not hear? We are going to the market."

Fenesis was intimidated by the cold stare from Kusla; perhaps the terrifying memory in the workshop from a while ago awoke in her.

But as it was a bright sunny day, there was nothing to be terrified of.

"I-I did hear, but I did consider that there are all sorts of markets."

She was clearly showing that she was trying to act tough, and it was really worth teasing her a little.

"Not that sort of large marketplace, just an ordinary one."

"I-Is that so? Then, what can we buy there? Some materials for spells?"

Looks like she has more or less recovered a little. Since she is asking such questions so gleefully, I really want to pat her on the head.

"Things like tubs full of cow eyes, and baskets of newts."

"Ack!?"

Upon hearing Kusla's words, Fenesis stopped in her tracks.

Kusla turned around, and a man, who resembled a worker, knocked into her after she suddenly stopped, and she, petite and white, tumbled forward.

"I was lying."

"...Lying is a blasphemy against God..."

Kusla wanted to retort back, saying that Fenesis' pretense was considered a lie, but upon seeing her fidget and cup her knees, he felt it was better not to add on to any trouble, and chose to remain silent for the time being.

"I will not buy such things, and besides, there is none of those to buy anyway. anyway, what I need now is wheat, rye, oat, chicken eggs, goat's milk; also, full-bodied grape wine, and..."

Kusla folded his fingers as he counted, and beside him, Fenesis immediately showed a suspicious expression.

"Are you preparing food?"

Her tone seemed to indicate she did not think alchemists need to eat.

Kusla however shrugged and said,

"These are all to be bought for experimenting."

"..."

"Ah, also, I need to buy some cow, horse and pigeon feces."

"...A-Are those used for experimenting too?"

"Certainly.."

"..."

Fenesis was no longer able to tell if he was teasing her, and asked lethargically,

"Are these really sold?"

She, who lived a life of prayer at the monastery every single day, probably felt that cow feces and cow eye balls were similar.

"Ahh, once dried up, cow and horse feces can be used for fuel. There are shops that sell them."

"...And pigeon's?"

"They are normally used for tanning. Do you know what tanning is?"

Kusla asked, and for a while, Fenesis did not answer. This lack of answer demonstrated the fact that she did not understand what it was.

"You peel off the hide like this."

"Hii!"

Kusla reached his fingers out to Fenesis and stroked her on the cheek, causing her to jump back in shock.

He looked up and grinned, but did not laugh. She placed her hand on her cheek, stone-faced, and once she recovered, her face was flushed red.

"Anyway, once the hide is removed, there is additional work to prevent the raw hide from rotting away. This is tanning, and in such situations, pigeon feces have to be applied. This is normally sold at leather tanning workshops or dye shops."

Then please say so in the first place, Fenesis thought as she glared at Kusla with tears in her eyes.

"And then, such things are used for refining metal."

"You are probably lying again, are you not?"

Fenesis sighed and said as she turned her head aside, starting to lament what she was doing at this place.

Perhaps he had teased her too much.

"Cow and horse feces can be used to strength iron."

Kusla first said this,

"And as for pigeon feces, I want to try out if it works the same as cow and horse feces."

"..."

Fenesis continued to keep her head turned aside.

Kusla however did not mind as he continued.

"As for eggs, I plan to use the white and shells. Once the shell is grounded into powder and thrown into the furnace, the impurities in the iron can be removed. The white is used to remove the turbid materials in the grape wine."

"...Grape wine?"

Kusla could not continue on if he were the only one explaining and rattling on while ignoring everything else.

Perhaps his personality was that of one who loves to take care of others.

"The purified full-bodied grape wine could be fermented into vinegar, and vinegar has properties that can dissolve metal. It is thus used as a reagent."

"...And, and wheat?"

"Ah, are egg shells not white? If the shells can alter the outcome of refining, I want to see what kind of effect wheat can do since it is white as well, so for this reason, I want to use wheat. It may have the same effect, but it may not be as effective."

In response to Kusla's explanation, Fenesis looked to be at a loss of what to do.

Perhaps she was starting to doubt after being teased so much.

"Do you know how iron is refined?"

"Eh? ...I-If it is at that level, I do still understand."

"Is that so?"

Kusla said this with a slight mocking tone, and Fenesis glared at him.

"You burn the rocks and gather the melted portion to form metals."

Am I correct? Fenesis straightened her body and puffed her chest, looking a little delighted.

"Basically, it is not wrong, but the actual work is a little more complicated."

"Ugh..."

"If it is iron sand, and that we need to refine iron of ordinary quality, your method will be the one used. We lay out iron sand on burning charcoal and wait for it to melt. If someone wants to increase the purity however, just remove the floating impurities on the surface."

"...A-And then?"

"The complicated part is when there is a lot of impurities other than iron. In that situation, the refining process is a lot more complicated. For example, when there is lead impurity inside, we have to first heat the ingot, melt away the lead that is easier to get rid of, and what is left is an iron block like coarse cotton. We take it out, cool it, smash it with a hammer to even everything out, and wash it in running water. After washing it in running water, there will be different layers in the mineral; some will sink fast, some will slowly sink, all due to the different densities. In that situation, we can simply choose to extract iron as far as possible, put it into the furnace, and melt it again. After that, we add some charcoal, some wood blocks with leaves on them, and afterwards, some lead. The reason why we have to add lead again is because it will melt sooner than iron, will melt away some of the extra impurities within, and allow us to extract them. The adding of charcoal and wood is to increase the purity. Sometimes, we may add things like egg shells and lime. Lime here...is some white rocks."

Kusla shrugged, and Fenesis nodded vaguely.

"The heating lasts between sunrise and sunset, or about there. At this point, factors like adding charcoal, the method of heating, and time taken will affect the product. When waiting for the heat to

take place, we have to remove the floating impurities and throw them away. Once everything is done, we remove the melted material and cool it, and after this phase, if we want to create things like swords or armor, we need to continue the processes of forging and quenching. If there is sulfur and other impurities, we need to change the temperature and additives used. That is probably the gist of it."

Upon hearing Kusla explain this was basically it, Fenesis, who was engrossed by hearing this, suddenly seemed to recover.

"I-It really is a little complicated."

"Right. It is this complicated even after knowing what we are refining."

The moment Kusla said this, Fenesis nodded vaguely again.

"Is there any question?"

He asked, and she lifted her head, but immediately showed a troubled expression and turned her head again.

"You are my invigilator, correct? It is necessary to exchange information and have mutual trust with you."

"..."

Fenesis eyes were glanced aside at Kusla, revealing the mistrust and fury at this trust he spoke of. However, once she turned her stare back, her face clearly showed doubt.

And then, she really could not help but keep her doubts in her heart, completely unlike a demure lady.

"There is probably something you lied to me about, but I still want to ask."

"That really is an awful bias you have."

"Exactly how far will you go with your blasphemy of God?"

Fenesis raised this question, ostensibly ignoring this joke Kusla made, and this was enough to render him speechless.

"You alchemists are all followers of heresy, spit upon God, disrupt the order in the world, and indulge in carousel, or so I heard."

"And then?"

"A-and then, I was assigned to watch over you..."

As he chatted on with Fenesis, the two of them arrived at the market. There was a vast array of goods within, and a bustling atmosphere filled the place. Kusla however was not here to buy ingredients for dinner, and he was not there to be a profiteer.

Obviously, they were here to purchase the goods he need, and soon, they were holding bags of all sizes.

Kusla handed a sack over to Fenesis, and she instinctively received. But soon after, she immediately frowned, for it was a sack filled with horse and cow feces."

"You, you really are...!"

Fenesis seemed to be angry, and sighed away in an unknown direction.

However, the shopping robbed her off the time to ask, and before they could continue with their questions, they had to continue moving along from one shop to another, which made Fenesis a little uneasy. She was really concerned, wondering if Kusla would be furious by this overly direct question.

For she just called it a heresy in front of an alchemist.

"As to be expected of a place near the warzone. We even have such shops here."

Kusla said as he stopped in front of a stall he passed by.

Fenesis was repulsed by the sack of feces she was holding by the hand, while concerned about Kusla as she continued to look over, but she too was surprised once she saw the stall.

"But these certainly do not look valuable when they are arranged like this."

Kusla noted wryly, and Fenesis could only curl her lips stiffly."

There were a lot of holy tools spread out on this stall; the shopkeeper noticed Kusla, who stopped in front of the stall, and walked out from inside.

"Oh my, is there anything you need? These products are the finest of consecrated goods from the Southern Archdiocese. Ah, you did some shopping for food? Let me introduce to you this pot here. If you pour in water from here, any foul water can be purified, and if you use this water to wash any ingredients, you do not have to worry about any Pagans having touched it at all. Currently, I can sell you one for 20 Quil, and two for 36 Quil. How about that?"

"You heard that?"

Kusla said this to Fenesis behind her with a teasing voice, and the shop keeper could be heard groaning. At this point, she did not have enough will to suspect that shop keeper for promoting the item with such suspicious functions, or rather, she was fully focused on moving that sack of dried feces away from her body.

"We-Well, if it is not one of the Sisters from the Knights...heh heh."

The residents in this town would immediately know she was affiliated to the Knights from the trims on her robes

Kusla ignored how the shop owner fidgeted as he was cornered, and made a quick glance of the items displayed at the stall.

There were brass candle altars, tin bottles, iron cups, and bronze tabernacles.

These were goods alchemists would continue to look on at, but amongst them, there was something that caught his eyes more.

"That is?"

"Ah? Th-this you mean?"

The shop owner panicked as he reached his hand out to grab it. It was a statuette of the Holy Mother, the size of a palm.

"This, Dear Sir, is a Holy Mother statuette specially ordered by the Knights of Gulbetty..."

"I suppose this is pure silver, ?"

The statuette was very inconspicuous, and on first glance, one would assume it was a crude item sculpted from soda lime carelessly.

But it was about time to take it away from the shop owner; it felt different from stone when held on the hand.

"How much for this?"

Kusla asked, and in response, the shop owner did not seem to understand his words as he remained confounded for a while.

"Er-erm, actually, this is not for sale."

"Hm?"

"Well, a little while back, it was once sold, but soon afterwards, there was an order that they would be recollected. It seemed there is a need to take care of the Church or something..."

Kusla stared at the Holy Mother statuette in his hand, and then turned his eyes to the shop owner.

"There is often this saying that the Knights are the right breast, and the Church is the left."

"Heh heh."

The shop owner however was feeling torn, wondering if he should smile in front of this Sister.

It was an undoubted fact that both the Church and the Knights worshipped the God above them, but the form of worship was significantly different.

The Saints they worshipped were completely different, but one would be really foolish to inquire if these Saints are borne of the same teachings.

Amongst these factors however, both sides do worship the deity called the Holy Mother.

These two powers were wrestling over the love of the Mother, and the people found it to be as laughable as twin babies fighting over a mother's breasts.

"So then, why is something that should be collected back by the Church here?"

"Eh, this was amongst the things in the storeroom, and I just so happened to find it...I had been looking for a time to return it, but since I was too busy..."

"I see."

Kusla heard the explanation from the shopkeeper as he examined the statuette. Suddenly, he noticed Fenesis' stare.

"So Miss Dolly is still at the age of craving?"



Kusla said this with a mischievous tone, and Fenesis immediately went silent as she puffed her cheeks.

"For someone like you to hold the Holy Mother--"

"This goes to you then."

"Ah, eh, eh?"

Fenesis panicked as she caught the Holy Mother figure Kusla let go of.

But the shop keeper was also panicking,

"Erm, that item is not for sale—"

"This is a deposit."

Kusla said as he put down the money.

The shop keeper, who panicked, had his stare taken by the money due to his nature as a merchant.

"And did you not want to return it to the Knights? We are from the Knights."

The moment the shop keeper heard this, he recovered, and finally lifted his head.

"No, but..."

"My name is Kusla, and I am an alchemist."

The shop keeper's expression froze immediately, and he was at a loss for words."

"Once you tell them that name, they will not do or say anything. If the money is not enough, they probably will pay the rest."

The shop keeper was at a loss of what to do, and turned to look at Fenesis with a look pleading for help, but she could not do anything either. She was clutching the Holy Mother's statuette close to her chest.

So be it then. after Kusla gave this look as he walked out of the stall, the owner seemed hesitant on saying something as he scratched his head and wondered if he should give chase. After seeing Fenesishe still went after Kusla. For a little while, Fenesis was bewildered by what happened, gave a disconcerted look afterwards, and in the end, after bowing to the shop keeper, chased after Kusla.

"E-Erm, is that true?"

"But you do not mind, right? This Miss Dolly here does match our Miss Sister here."

"..."

Fenesis wanted to express her fury for being treated like an idiot after all, but could not say that she wanted to return the Holy Mother figure.

After a short silence, she said,

"This is not Miss Dolly. It is the Holy Mother."

Fenesis said these words with a cherishing tone as she stared at the Holy Mother figure she was holding close to her chest, and upon seeing this, Kusla shrugged, *whatever you say*, and gave such a look.

For the time being, Kusla had told the shop keeper to inform Post of the situation, and Post would disburse the rest of the incomplete payment. Post would then begrudge Kusla for a while and make the latter return the Holy Mother statuette, but in that situation, Kusla would then say that Fenesis was the one who wanted to do this. As Fenesis belonged to the Prayer Squad, Post would have to submit a request to her superior, asking that Fenesis was to return it.

While he abide by this foolish-like bureaucratic procedures, Kusla would be able to secretly steal the Holy Mother statuette from Fenesis, melt it, and give some vague answers afterwards. It was unlikely the Higher-ups would have an argument over a mere statuette of the Holy Mother.

This was the basic of basic ways an alchemist could accumulate money.

"Then, let us pick up from where we left off. We did not stray from the path just for the sake of it."

Fenesis, who had been rubbing the Holy Mother statuette whilst ignoring that her robes were covered with dull silver, lifted her head upon hearing Kusla start this topic calmly. Even though they were in the midst of noisy uproars, these words managed to reach her ears.

Suddenly, Kusla said with a serious look,

"But we certainly are heretics."

Kusla continued to stride forward while leaving a stunned Fenesis behind while she stopped in her tracks, and she hurriedly ran after him.

"Most of the people at the Knights misunderstand us. It is true that there are some alchemists pursuing an elixir of immortality, or a miracle elixir that can cure all sorts of ailments; As for me...I too am chasing after for something a little ridiculous."

"Eh?"

"No, it is nothing."

Kusla shook his head, and continued,

"Anyway, Alchemists are basically the same as Craftsmen, but unlike Craftsmen, Alchemists are a collection of people who will never have a good end. This is the reason."

Kusla looked aside to Fenesis, and tapped his hand at his head.

Fenesis gave a skeptical expression as she looked on.

"Because there is an unhinged mind ."

"...Are you talking about me?"

And so, Kusla inadvertently chuckled at the words Fenesis said to him.

"Ahaha, that is not it. I am sorry for teasing you a few times, so please do not be so suspicious."

"..."

"I am serious. I just cannot stop myself."

"...You cannot stop?"

"Right, I cannot stop. Once I find a certain objective, I would have an irresistible urge to track it down to its origins. Those obsessed with metallurgy cannot bear it if they cannot find the perfect metallurgical method. What if I use this method do this, what about this, how about that? We will continue to work on it after countless attempts and countless methods, until we gain progress. In that case, what do you think will happen?"

"..."

Fenesis pulled her jaw back in, ostensibly peeping as she stared at Kusla.

"One will fall into heresy."

If the purity of iron can be raised through the use of ample charcoal, what about other forms of coal? And so, they would burn all sorts of items to form coal, and add them little by little. In the end, the

results would definitely vary. One would then wonder if it was due to something else. Someone said it was because of the type of wood, another said it was due to the humidity in the weather; another said, *no, the constellations two days ago was not aligned properly*, and finally, someone called out, saying it was best when he went to the Church to repent.

And so, it was a matter of time before people started to defy God.

There were some who would try using spiritual or curse techniques, and use abhorrent creatures like lizards or toads to make coal. Even those that managed to maintain their sanity would have some radical thoughts after testing out all sorts of tree materials that could be made into charcoal, only to find that they did not work.

Shall we try using the wood from the legendary Cross that Saint was crucified to death on?

Perhaps some would have this notion as well.

Limestone and egg shells could cause a different outcome, and dog bones would cause another different outcome; in that case, what about putting a Saint's bones in the furnace?

"Craftsmen gain their rewards through the production of items, and of what quality these products are of, but we are not like that. It is just that our interests coincide with those in authority. To an outsider, we may seem to be committing folly, and I myself to think this is the case. However, we just like what we like, and we pursue for whatever we want to pursue. the issue is that the people around us do not think of it this way. They will simply wonder what this person is plotting, what that person is going to come up with that. For that person is an Alchemist...someone who strayed off the path..."

Kusla did not know what orders that Friche, who once expressed her love for him, received from the Church in the end. She probably believed wholeheartedly in the misunderstanding on the Church's side, and the Knights too probably had a similar misunderstanding, which resulted in that overzealous response.

In fact, he did not want to talk about that dangerous topic.

For he felt it was merely a test of a refining technique's quality.

"Anyway, we can only take the remarks the people around us make for the sake of our research. If we do not do so, we will not be able to ensure ourselves. But this will cause us to be more demented as a result, and in the end, we end up being watched by a Sister with a honest religious heart."

"!"

Fenesis remained silent at Kusla's sarcasm, but this frozen expression did not remain for long.

And Kusla naturally knew the reason behind it.

For this was not a joke.

Fenesis, who seemed wise, understood that as well.

"We knew, but we cannot stop ourselves. That is why we are foolish."

Kusla chuckled with a sarcastic expression on his face as he looked down at Fenesis beside him.

Fenesis was ostensibly resisting something as she brought her chin back in and averted her stare unhappily.

It seemed she was not used to interacting with another person's true feelings.

A hunter, upon seeing that pure sidelong face of hers, would ostensibly become the hunted.

"...Are you not tired?"

In regards to this brief question from Fenesis, Kusla was startled for a while.

"What?"

"Are you not tired? Of living that way of life?"

Fenesis seemed to be looking at Kusla with a pitying expression, causing the latter to grimace.

This expression was the same as when she showed whilst Kusla was introducing the workshop to her. His past was filled with poisonings all around, that he had to be aware of any such attempt on him, and from thus forth, he had to continue living this life. Fenesis seemed to have deeply realized such a reality, so that expression was probably one of compassion.

I really am a failure as an Alchemist to let a pretentious Sister without any knowledge of the world pity me.

"Who knows? Nothing like this had happened to anyone else other than me. Do you think I can imagine the joy of {{Furigana|Interest|Kusla|margin=12}} sleeping peacefully?"

"..."

"At this point, I am starting to realize how embarrassing this name is, but people everything seem to be suspecting me."

"Eh?"

"I just continue on to my destination regardless of day and time. That is basically what it means."

He never said such things to Friche before.

Why? Even he, if asked, would not know the answer.

"This is the reality of an Alchemist, nothing more, nothing less."

Did I express myself too plainly? He did think of this before.

But perhaps, he wished for someone to listen to me.

Thomas Blanket, who once worked in that workshop, suddenly died. Friche too suffered a similar fate as he did.

Those in this line of occupation would have to be more open-minded about such events that were to be expected, but as for why others would overreact to the things he do in his pursuit of his interests? This question often lingered in him. The motive behind an Alchemist becoming one was truly a trivial matter, and there was nothing to exaggerate.

As he continued to ponder, his mind became white, like the robes draped on Fenesis.

In the face of such whiteness, he subconsciously thought of bringing his hand to it.

"Thus, I have a request to ask of you."

But if he were to continue rattling on, he would be an unqualified Alchemist.

Kusla looked at Fenesis, and said,

"If you are here because of some severe misunderstanding, please tell me."

"...Misunderstanding?"

"To be precise, it should be called a secret order."

In response to Kusla's words, Fenesis' expression tightened for just a moment. As for whether it was because there was something she was hiding, or something else, he did not know.

But though he did not know, it would be best of him to make a promise.

"It will be troublesome if both of us continue to doubt everyone. The large shadows appearing on the wall are most likely just small rabbits."

"Am I a rabbit myself?"

"It is as you say."

Kusla teased Fenesis a little, and the latter inadvertently let out a laugh.

But her smile gradually vanished, and with that remaining expression left on her face, she looked over at her hand.

"We are the same..."

"Ah?"

"Eh?"

Fenesis lifted her head, and blinked.

She seemed to be muttering to herself unwittingly.

"I-it is nothing. Either way, I am your invigilator, and I have to finish this mission."

The words she said at this point caused them to feel a different atmosphere different from before. It would be too much of a dampener to continue asking Fenesis after seeing her holding the Holy Mother statuette in her clutches, ostensibly praying.

Based on the fact that she could enter a Knights' monastery at such a young age, it seemed Fenesis did not live a simple life either.

"Anyway, I hope we enjoy this together."

Kusla said, and the Church bell indicating the prayer time at noon rang throughout the marketplace.

Act 3

The few days thereafter were uneventful.

Kusla and Wayland were concentrated on rebuilding Thomas' metallurgical records, and did not notice any enemies hidden in the shadows, intent upon seizing the workshop that had Thomas' records in it.

Fenesis too came by to the workshop obediently every single day, and simply watched Kusla worked. Kusla's party did worry that she would be poisoned by her allies and pushed over to them, but it seemed there were no issues with her health. At this point, there had yet to be any trouble they had to deal with immediately. If it were mercury poisoning, the gums would turn black; if arsenic, the fingertips would swell. Both of them could easily see through such common techniques.

Whilst they thought a highly motivated inspector focused on his job would nitpick and look for trouble, Fenesis was honestly just observing them.

Perhaps the words said during the trip to the marketplace worked to some extent, and eased her bias and suspicions against the alchemists.

Though Kusla personally thought of it this way, it meant that with reduced bias and vigilance, there would be reduced tension.

And soon, she started to get bored about observing Kusla's work.

"If you're sleepy, how about you go over there to sleep?"

The weather had been chilly recently, the sky was often overcast, and it had been a while since the sky was as bright as it was on this day.

But the furnace was not extinguished for days, so no matter the weather outside, the workshop was warm and cozy inside.

Kusla raised this suggestion just as Fenesis was sitting on the chair, yawning away, and finally nodding her head away in a stupor.

"Eh, ah...no...I am fine."

"Even if you are fine, I will start to get sleepy. Yawning is contagious."

"But...huu...oooo..."

The robes on her body looked very wide, the hem and the sleeves were very long, and her petite self resembled a white cat as she sat on the chair and yawned away.

Kusla sighed, and Fenesis looked rather embarrassed as she slowly stood up and took a deep breath.

"How can an inspector go to sleep now?"

"Say the yawning mouth? Who was the one napping?"

"I was not napping."

Kusla shrugged, went back to work, hammered a nail, and laid out a piece of parchment.

"What do you have to do today?"

"Something very troublesome."

Kusla answered in a somewhat stiff voice, and Fenesis was a little tentative as she went silent, probably due to her guilt for falling asleep. However, that was for just a moment.

"But that is not a proper explanation."

"It is distillation. Distillation."

"..."

Fenesis stared at Kusla wordlessly, and then averted her stare uncomfortably.

"If you do not know what that is, just say it."

"I do not."

"What happens when you heat water?"

"Huh?"

Fenesis merely widened her eyes at Kusla's sudden question, and so, he repeated it again.

"What happens when you heat water?"

"Eh...ah...well, it...becomes hot."

"That is right. You are a genius."

Fenesis was stunned by Kusla's words for quite some time, only to recover and realize she was duped, and glared at him angrily.

"I am sorry for yawning beside you."

But Fenesis was not willing to admit she fell asleep, and from her expression, it seemed she had no intention of apologizing. At this point, Kusla merely sighed, and beckoned for her to come over. She however curled her body back cautiously, "Come over and help." and only after Kusla called for her did she lean over to the table unwillingly.

"Hold that part down."

Kusla held a corner of the rolled up parchment, and made her hold the other side. This parchment probably came from a good lamb; the part with the words written on it was thick, but the edges would crumple and curl.

The tightly crammed words on the parchment were very tiny, akin to the psychotic-like feeling from Thomas' room. Thus, there was no way to read it if the parchment was not laid out properly.

"Ho-Hold it down? W-What do so you plan to do with this?"

Fenesis cringed as she stood in front of the uneven parchment that was like an old person's skin.

"Right. You do not have to be so terrified. I am certain that there is no poison on the parchment."

"...I-I am not scared or anything here."

But though she said so, it was probably a little nerve-wrecking for her to touch something made from skin for the first time. Its unique, soft touch was somewhat akin to a caterpillar with a hard shell.

"Do not overdo it. It will do appear if you pull it too hard."

Kusla used the back of his left hand as he fitted a mark into a hole made on it. He then used the hammer, held firmly in his right hand, to nail it down.

Certainly, there were people who would have nailed the four corners of a parchment before writing on it. There were already small holes riddled on it, which meant Thomas must have done the same thing. But even so, if one did not watch his strength when nailing, there would be tears starting from the small holes at the corners. Thus, one had to be careful when doing this.

"Right...next one, right here."

"Ah, sure."

Fenesis followed Kusla's instructions and moved around repeatedly to hold the parchment down. Due to her petite size, she could only hold it down by leaning her body from the chair.

And so, they continued to do this until all 5 pieces of parchment was nailed down.

The metallurgical records of Thomas' repeated experiments were laid out in front of them.

They had yet to break the code, and did not know the details, but the reconstituted records alone were a testament to Thomas' ability. It was not a marvellous method, or some brand new experiment; shown on the parchment was the universe the man named Thomas had created.

And so, as a fellow Alchemist, Kuska was stating at this universe depicted on the parchment with admiration.

But Fenesis, who was right beside him, was sniffing at her hands.

Kusla, feeling a little forlorn, sighed and said,

"If you are that concerned about it, go wash it off."

"Ah, no."

Fenesis answered with what was ostensibly her catchphrase, but in the end, "Sorry, I will go and wash my hands then." She said this, and went off to the water trough.

"I say, have you never touched a parchment before?"

Kusla asked as he threw a towel to Fenesis, whilst her hands were dropping wet as she started at her nun robes hesitantly.

"Ah... no, but I did hear of it before."

It seemed, from how obstinate she was, that she was far off in personality from the ideal Sister.

"Did you not come from a monastery? Is there not a scribe assigned there?"

"There is, but..."

"But what?"

"I never saw the scribe before because my position is not high enough."

The order that was said to have been set by God could actually be said to be assigned by the monastery, and the hierarchy was tightly maintained. Parchments were costly items, and it seemed the higher ranks wanted to prevent the parchments from being soiled by peasants. It seemed this was the reason why Fenesis was so excited when she was told she could read any book to her heart's content during their first meeting.

Kusla recalled that whenever Fenesis returned, she would be behind a high ranking clergymen. She was really at the lowest level of hierarchy, treated as a tool.

"I have no idea why you want to be in such a place of suffering."

"So that I can follow God's teachings, and to me, I gave no idea why you alchemists have such passion."

"Heh, so we are peas in a pod."

Kusla nodded, and Fenesis seemed a little surprised, wondering if she was fooled again, but she ended up relaxing in the end.

"Then, let us get back to what we were talking about."

"Eh?"

"When you heat water, its temperature will rise. And then?"

Have you finally stop treating me as a fool? She must have been thinking this way

Fenesis continued to blink as she stood beside Kusla, and the latter continued to stare at Thomas' little universe, saying,

"Do you not want to know what I want to do?"

"Ah...eh, ah, yes. But,"

"Then, after heating the water, the temperature will rise. what happens after that?"

Kusla repeated his own question again, and Fenesis stammered for a while, before answering,

"I-It will evaporate."

"Correct. Then, what will happen after adding hot liquor?"

"Eh? Should it not be the same?"

"What you say is not necessary wrong, but in fact, liquor is a combination of two different fluids; you probably know about that. Also, amongst these two fluids, one of them will evaporate first."

"..."

Fenesis blinked her beautiful green eyes, *haa*, and answered as such.

"Also, you also know that when these two fluids vaporize, they will condense back into liquid when cooled down. This is the method of extracting and concentrating the two types of liquid in liquor; we call this distillation."

Kusla took a wine bottle from the shelf and shook it in his hand.

Fenesis frowned, ostensibly a little furious at Kusla for start to drinking while working in the middle of the day.

"This is one way of making distilled liquor, and we need to use copper distilling equipment to do this. Though brewers are better at this technique, it is rumored that an alchemist was the one who invented this technique."

"Eh?"

"There is a mineral called zinc, and when combined with copper, can be made into brass. Erm...ah, this one here."

There were samples of minerals and metals on the shelf, and Kusla brought a dull golden metal to Fenesis.

"It was said that it was used as money a long time ago, and the methods of making it was classified; I heard it produced under coincidental circumstances, and also, after several hundreds of years, the method to produce it has been lost. The current production method is brought back by those who traveled to the East, and passed on the technique till today."

"...Are you, going to make this?"

"Today, what we are making is one of the original products, zinc. Zinc was original discovered in the production of lead, a white substance that is lined on the top of furnaces. Alchemists have racked their brains, and finally realized its true identity; or rather, they discovered a mineral stone rich in zinc, and determined the optimal way to extract it. It is to cool its heated vapor suitably."

Fenesis continued to stare blankly at the brass, at Kusla, and back again; perhaps it was hard to imagine.

"It is said that this method was a precursor to distillation, and repeated distillation can create liquor. Of course, nobody knows what the fact really is, and this may be just things some people just say randomly. But no matter what, the discovery of a technique in alchemy is closely related to other skills. Some insignificant discovery may bring about an unexpected outcome, like this."

Kusla paused for a moment, and sighed harder,

"I feel that what we can imagine....may happen someday soon."

In response to Kusla, who puffed his chest and indulged in his spiel whilst shaking the coat he was dressed in, Fenesis merely answered briefly.

"...Huh."

She felt there was nothing significant about the brass in her hand, and returned it.

Kusla took it back puzzlingly, and asked, stupefied.

"...I say, do you not have any thoughts of my explanation just now?"

"Eh?"

In response to Kusla's question, Fenesis continued to look dumbfounded.

She then glared at Kusla immediately, wondering if she was duped again, but the latter looked rather devastated.

"No, i am not teasing you. Hm, how do I explain this..."

"W-what is wrong with you again?"

"Huh?"

Kusla raised an eyebrow as he said,

"A new discovery will bring about the development of a new technique, and a new technique will be used in an unexpected area, bringing about a creation of something marvellous. Do you not find this really amazing?"

Kusla shook the bottle, causing a splashing sound within, and took a swig from it.

But Fenesis' response was still dull.

"This is something really amazing. All the alchemists in the world have been revealing the secrets of this world just like this. This is what everyone says, to remove God's clothes."

Kusla turned his stare towards Fenesis, but the latter protected the front of her robes instinctively. It seemed the experience of suffering at the hands of Wayland was enough to cause a psychological trauma, and to her, not letting her robes get removed was far more important than solving the secrets of the world.

"Speaking of which, I think one of the reasons why Alchemists can pursue some radical goals is because they feel they can do anything."

The reason why Alchemists were despised by the Church was not simply because they seemed eccentric.

The teaching the Church promoted was that the current corrupt world will one day receive its final judgement, and that only those who always did deeds of goodness would enter Heaven.

They felt this world was constantly being corrupted by evil, and one day, they would meet their end.

But the future alchemists thought of was completely different. Soon in the future, their research would be able to blossom, what they could not do up till this point would become possible, and what they

could not understand would be revealed to everyone. It was because they had such a belief that they could continue to indulge in their research.

But as expected, Fenesis, who was not used to this sort of thinking, continued to remain confounded.

And she did not get angry at such people for being so radically different from the Church's philosophy.

She never thought of this in the first place.

"The original owner of this workshop, Thomas, is probably a classical case of alchemists I talk about. He was alone, drifting in the sea of knowledge, and through these records alone, I certainly can understand his determination not to give up. I am eager to decipher the things written on these parchments."

Kusla paused, and lamented,

"This is how the world simply is."

Perhaps this liquor was more potent than he thought.

In the face of Thomas' brilliance that was laid out on the table, Kusla was anxiously trying to convey its brilliance to others.

But those who could not understand just could not do so. Most of the time, they had no intention of doing so.

Amongst them, "I do not understand, but you really look like a happy child", Friche, who smiled to him as she said this, was actually a spy from the Church.

Kusla brought over the tool beside him.

Alchemists were just Alchemists, people who were despised for walking down the path of heresy.

"Is it, really that interesting?"

And so, what he felt from the sudden question was anger.

Kusla glanced aside, and found not an expression that was mocking him, but a shocked expression, taken aback from his furious look.

"—I said this before; our thinking is not exactly the most normal of them all."

Kusla said this, and immediately turned back again.

He actually acted so proudly, just as how he was when he left the workshop, right after he was recognized as an Alchemist.

Why did he risk his life for this? Why did he choose to ensure the fate of being shunned by every person? Why did he not feel despair in this life devoid of companionship? Why, even when the person he could call his first love was killed in front of himself, could he only think of metallurgy?

He could not understand.

Of course, there was the existence of a goal, and he was working harder towards it, but other than it, all he felt was an unshakeable satisfaction.

Kusla added the metallurgical records he got the previous day, together with the speculated meanings and numbers of the code to the words on the parchments.

This joy was something only those that personally worked for it could empathise with.

Kusla thought as he inadvertently lifted his head.

And then, after turning his head back again, he found Fenesis, all curled up in fear.

"Ah, no... That was not, what I meant..."

"Want to try?"

"...Eh?"

As Fenesis remained startled, Kusla marched towards her, saying,

"One will not understand without trying it once. The same goes for you too; you probably had this experience before entering the monastery, did you not?"

In regards to Kusla's words, Fenesis remained wide mouthed, and then, she slowly nodded.

"The work today is troublesome, but not too difficult, and not too time consuming. How about you try it?"

Fenesis remained still, ostensibly unable to comprehend what she just heard. After a while, these words start to sink into her mind slowly, and her eyes started to swim in confusion. This innocent girl then answered uneasily,

"...I will not do anything...that will defy God's teachings, you know?"

In the face of such words from a pure maiden, who knew how many men on this world would smile and guarantee this.

However, what Kusla wanted to remove was God's clothes, and not a maiden's.

"Then you should see for it yourself."

Kusla did not guarantee anything, but Fenesis accepted this, ostensibly treating it as a form of sincerity from the latter. She then nodded her head, ostensibly swallowing something hard.

"I will affirm this for myself. This is something important."

Kusla felt that this line was astoundingly convincing, and was a little surprised, but he still managed to show a natural smile.

"Right, you should affirm this yourself."

"Yes."

"Then, let us go downstairs and work together with Wayland."

"Eh—!?"

Fenesis stumbled backwards with a pale face, but Kusla looked up and laughed.

"You should affirm for yourself whether that man is a lunatic or not."

"..."

Fenesis showed a doubtful look again as she faced Kusla, grinning away as he walked towards the stairs.

And then, once she realized the meaning behind those words, she chased after him in large strides.

"Erm, did you just lie to me—"

"But that man will kill if there is a necessity, and he is an incorrigible womanizer. It will be wise for you to take note of this before you end up using your body to affirm this."

The moment Kusla turned his head around to say this, Fenesis stopped in her tracks.

In this world, there were a lot of things where it would be too late once one affirms them.

Her expression was a mix of doubt and uneasiness, but sometimes, a pretentious expression would be useful.

"Of course!"

She said angrily, and followed Kusla down the stairs.

It was a fact that blacksmiths were very popular amongst women.

They had to spend long hours working in front of a sweltering hot furnace, move the fuel, man the bellows, swing a large hammer to crush the ores, and move the refined ingots out. The result of such time-consuming work over a long period of time was a firm body devoid of excess fat, sculpted like iron. However, they did not need to live a vicious life of bloodshed like mercenaries, and one would even feel some poetic sense when viewing into their stares, focused on the furnace silently.

The two of them arrived at the second basement level of the workshop, and Wayland, half-naked on top, was near the mouth of the furnace and the waterwheel mechanism, staring at them.

There were many scandalous rumors of him being involved with some Sisters from a monastery before he arrived in Gulbetty, and those were probably not rumors that were exaggerated. After arriving downstairs, Fenesis was tugging at Kusla's sleeve terrifiedly, and froze in her tracks once she spotted Wayland.

Wayland naturally detected them quickly, and glanced behind at them as he carried the wood materials on his shoulder and beside his abdomen. However, he did not mind in particular as he proceeded with his own work.

It would be too disrespectful to doubt that it was an act considering how serious he looked, and at this point, Wayland was practically a man seeking for truth.

His disheveled hair was merely tied loosely, and his rarely trimmed moustache always showed the suspicious of this person. However, this was also the proof of a man putting work as his priority.

Dauntless.

His appearance as such that even Fenesis was mesmerized by it..

And then, she showed a completely different expression as she quickly turned to Kusla, and chided him with a vengeful expression,

"I will never believe in your words again."

"Even though that person groped you on the breasts the first time he met you?"

Fenesis was immediately rendered speechless, but soon thereafter, she regained composure and said,

"May-maybe he was a little rough..."

And to think that line came out at this moment.

Fenesis then ignored Kusla, who gave a forlorn look, and then continued to stare at Wayland, ostensibly mesmerized by that dexterous skill of his.

This caused Kusla to recall what Wayland once said.

First, create a bad impression, and then, show sincerity. The conquest will succeed thereafter.

You swine, Kusla muttered in his heart, *I might as well use this the next time.*

"Wayland, hold on for a moment."

Upon hearing Kusla's words however, Wayland did not turn back to look.

He was carrying a large bellow, made from leather hide, and placed it beside the furnace. A torch, rake, hammer, pincers, iron ladle, and all sorts of tools beside cast around the furnace. If he could add some strange bone or some offering, he could be seen as a magician.

But the current appearance Wayland showed was that of a finely-trained first-rate craftsman.

"What is it?"

When he finally turned around, he did not drag on his words like usual.

Naturally, he did not glance over to look at Fenesis, and his stare was completely devoid of a stare.

"I want to show this guest what we are doing exactly."

"..."

At this point, Wayland's finally gave Fenesis a serious look.

What sort of materials can I get from the girl?

He was thinking of this seemingly absurd idea with an undoubtedly serious expression.

"I'm not playing around here."

Upon hearing Wayland's words, Fenesis spoke up,

"I-I'm not p-pl-playing around here...either..."

Her voice got softer at the end, and it seemed she felt some sort of pressure from Wayland's stare.

If he were dressed up, Wayland's physique would be rather lanky as compared to a bystander, but in fact, his body was without excess fat, like a sculpture. The stains of charcoal covered all the way to his elbow, and he was sweating profusely despite the frigid weather.



In contrast, Fenesis, who would come over every day, sit on the chair, and stare at their work in boredom, could not argue.

But Wayland was really an absolute genius in this aspect.

After a while, he hid the annoyance he showed on his face a while ago, shrugged, and turned to the furnace again.

"Whatever, just don't get in my way."

"Ah..."

Fenesis intended to say something, but stammered, and changed her tune as she thanked him,

"Thank you very much...."

She was a delicate lady who was dominated by a ferocious man.

At this point, Kusla felt that it was a little bland.

Fenesis, who was giving Wayland an expression of admiration, turned around to give a condescending expression at Kusla. This was also one of the reasons why Kusla felt this way.

"Then? What do I do here?"

Hurry up and tell you, you Alchemist that only know how to talk.

It really took him a lot of effort not to click his tongue when he felt this unstated line.

"Wayland, is the air vent upstairs done?"

Upon hearing Kusla's words, Wayland turned around and shook his head.

"Not yet, but...ah, I'll do that. I can't let you handle it."

"You know how to do that?"

In response to Kusla's question, Wayland glared back with a savage expression far full of spite than any other situations,

"You just want to eat from a crucible, right!?"

As for who first started using this line, and what exactly did this line mean, perhaps nobody knew of it at this age.

But even so, both Alchemists and Craftsmen would use this line whenever they argued.

Kusla shrugged, and Wayland strode to the stairs and went up.

"You're really bipolar."

Kusla muttered wrly, and Fenesis, who was staring at Wayland as the latter went upstairs, said with a criticizing attitude.

"This is still far better than some people who only know how to talk, right?"

"..."

Unknowingly, Kusla became the hero, and Wayland became the hero.

Vicissitudes are everywhere, and some minor opportunities would cause things to change. This was the first time an Alchemist first learns.

"Then, what am I supposed to do?"

"...Wayland has gone to do the toughest reclamation part. We're in charge of keeping the fire burning downstairs.

"I understand."

"However..."

"?"

Kusla sized up Fenesis' attire, and sighed,

"Your white clothes will be soiled if you wear them for work."

There was a lot of cloth used for the veil, the loose clothing, and the large sleeves.

The pure white fabric was a symbolism of one's poorness, obedience and purity, and looked worrying in this workshop filled with coal and oil.

"You better change into something else. I don't know if there's anything you can wear here."

Kusla ran to the storeroom, searched through for a while, found some decent looking pieces of clothing, and things ended up as expected.

"Not bad. This looks rather cute, doesn't it?"

"Please do not take this as a joke."

Fenesis, who finished changing in the bedroom, was glaring at Kusla as she said this, ostensibly sandwiched in cloth.

Due to the constant folds on the creases, this clothing resembled more like a cloth armor wrapping around her rather than being worn on her.

Her long hair however remained in the veil, and insisted not to remove, saying that she could not bring it back alone if she removed it.

And so, Kusla could only add a sack on it, and it felt as intriguing as a finishing touch after some modification.

"Never mind, let's leave this be for the time being. If we don't get to work, that man's going to roar at us."

Fenesis nodded hard and indicated her agreement to Kusla's words.

However, it seemed that she did not want to obstruct Wayland's work, rather than a show of her fear of him.

"It's very rare to see highly pure zinc ores, but there was mention of it once in the highest level of metallurgical records the Knights possess. It is a light violet mineral that's like transparent amber...but what we can use are ores filled with large amounts of impurities."

As Kusla was Wayland's fellow apprentice in the same workshop, he had a rough understanding of where the equipment were when working. He soon found an ore, a large, uncrushed rock.

"This ore...well, it's not too bad. If the color's a little darker, it means there's a higher iron content, and we don't know whether we're extract zinc or iron. Sometimes, there will be sulfur, but the most common impurity inside is lead; sometimes, we can find silver.

One could see a crystal, glittering like beeswax, from the ore, melted incompletely and amalgamated together. Kusla had already found the hammer, but upon seeing Fenesis, he was certain that the hammer was most likely heavier than she was.

Thus, he found a chisel and mallet from a nearby shelf, and handed them to her.

"Crush it. You just need to make them the size of pebbles."

"..."

"And be careful of your eyes. The crushed fragments may fly into your eyes."

Fenesis blinked in response to Kusla's words, and nodded,

Her delicate arms were such that such small tools looked heavy in her hands, and she walked with a weird posture to the ore placed on the floor, ostensibly dragged down by the chisel and hammer. Kusla glanced at her, and her expression was similar to when she was facing the parchments on the table.

He raised his chin, indicating for her to proceed, and she bent down tentatively. She was practically picking flowers to make a flower ring as she sat elegantly in front of the furnace, and this certainly was a strange feeling.

But it certainly was interesting seeing her cringe tentatively, *kak, kok*, and hammer away at the chisel.

Might not be a bad idea to have a female disciple, this ridiculous notion flashed in his mind, and he inadvertently scratched in response before proceeding to work on something else.

Technically speaking, the process to extract zinc was not easy, but the hard part was to cool the air suitable. This required careful attention of introducing air and regulating the temperature of the flames. Thomas had defined the amount of ores to be used and the amount of charcoal to be burned in his records, and the zinc content, composition, shape and impurities extracted from the ores would become the next crucial line in solving Thomas' little universe.

It was often said that one had to steal his master's skills through his eyes, but Thomas probably would have hated having the results of his metallurgical research stolen.

"Have you crushed it already?"

Kusla walked to the furnace, intending to do some preparations, but turned his head around upon seeing Fenesis' uneasy look.

He peered over, and found that there were only bits, too small to be called fragments, beside her.

At this point, he could not help but sigh, kneel down, and reached his hands from behind her while almost pressing down on her.

"Don't crush it so small. watch me."

"Eh, ah—"

Kusla held her by the hands hard despite her being at a complete loss. He readied his chisel and held the hammer shank tightly.

Her hands, and even her petite body was in the clutches of his arms.

"..."

"It's dangerous to ease your grip. Hold it as tightly as you can."

"!"

He grabbed onto Fenesis's hands whilst she was curled up in fear, started applying a moderate amount of strength to hold it tightly, *gak*, and smashed the hammer down on the chisel that was resting on the ore.

"Huh, this is some unexpectedly good ore. If a good ore is crushed well, the chopped surface will be glittering."

"..."

"Right, next."

Kusla deliberately added on this line, probably to show this broken surface to a somewhat uneasy Fenesis, and then proceeded to crush the rock twice, thrice.

Gak, Gok, while these sounds rang clearly, Fenesis would inadvertently cringed, but soon, she got used to it.

It seemed she had understood how to apply strength, so Kusla first let go of her hand that was holding onto the hammer.

"I'll steady the chisel, so just hammer it hard."

Fenesis' small hand, which was holding the chisel, was completely covered by Kusla's, so there was no need to worry that she would hit herself.

"If you're scared of hitting it too hard out of a sudden, just tap at it lightly first, and then add more force to it gradually."

Fenesis held her breath wordlessly, and started knocking at the chisel as she followed what Kusla said.

"A little harder."

Ko, gok.

"Some more."

Gok, gok.

"Put more strength to it."

Gok, gok.

"Just crush it thinking that it's the head of the person you hate."

GAK!

The left hand holding the chisel had nothing to support off as it fell aside.

The ore beside her was crushed in halves, rolling about as they showed beautiful glitter.

"That's how it is. Keep at it."

Kusla let go of the hand holding the chisel, and patted Fenesis gently on the shoulder.

She looked back and forth at her hands, her face looking as if she just saw something inexplicable.

"That last smash was good."

Kusla said, and Fenesis looked away whilst maintaining this expression.

"By the way, who did you think of when the person you hate is mentioned."

Fenesis lifted her head, seemingly pondering over it for a while, but soon turned her stare back at Kusla, answering pretentiously.

"I suppose I do not have to say this, right?"

"Haa."

Fenesis snorted in a condescending manner, turned her head back, and continued to crush the rocks. She was certainly more ferocious than before, and one could hear this from the pounding sounds. Kusla was beside her, sifting through the rocks that could be used, and could see how serious she was. Perhaps, in contrast to her appearance, she really liked this job.

He gathered the crushed bits that were sifted, and then used a larger hammer to crush them.

At this phase, the impurities could be removed from iron or other ores, but not from zinc ores. There was a need to heat the other impurities to a certain temperature.

The fragments that were further grounded by Kusla were then placed on a scale, and the insufficient parts were to be crushed further before being added on.

"Hey, that's enough already."

There was no hesitance in the punching sounds; it was unknown if she had gotten addicted to it, and the crushed fragments had formed a hill

An emotionlessly looking Fenesis, upon hearing Kusla's words, suddenly recovered from her trance like state. She was breathing erratically, but she looked satisfied after having vented her frustrations.

"That's quite some effort you put in. Is there something that's annoying you daily?"

Kuala wakes towards Fenesis, who was standing beside the scale, and took the hammer and chisel from her hand as he asked this. In response, her beautiful green eyes turned towards him.

She wiped the sweat below her nose with her hand, and answered with that same pretentious expression she once showed,

"Because there is someone who has been fooling me often."

"Really? There's a lot of bad people on this world."

Fenesis could only show Kusla a look of forlornness and surprise in response to his words, but one could sense a smile from him.

"Then, we weigh these ores, and mix them with the prepared charcoal."

"There is a need to use lots of charcoal, is it not?"

"Ahh, there's a need to use it for the majority of the metallurgical processes. The firepower when it burns is great, and it obviously is material itself. These are made from beech, and there are lots of types we can use, like how we can choose pine or oak in the South if we want to refine material. However, a lot needs to be used no matter what kind of tree it is, so if we can find some way to smelt metal at a high rate, the saved cost will be massive."

Her breathing as a little hasty, but Fenesis nodded seriously. It was a delightful thing for Kusla to have someone listen to him seriously.

As he thought about this, he suddenly thought, *This is the exact same thing as how we control a person's heart.*

"After this, we're going to throw this charcoal into the fire for burning, and once that happens, the amount of vaporized zinc will increase.

Kusla said as he pointed at the ceiling, and Fenesis lifted her head obediently to look there.

"Wayland will be in charge of condensing the vapor zinc and collecting it."

"..."

Fenesis looked back again, and gave a look of incomprehension as she said,

"This sounds simple..."

"It is not too difficult once you understand the rationale behind it, but it'll be difficult at the beginning when you fumble around."

"..."

Obviously, Fenesis could not understand how difficult it actually was. The same was for Kusla, as once he left his vocational workshop, he really wanted to invent something through his own strength, only to realize then how difficult it was.

"But the difficulty you can quickly understand will probably come immediately."

"Eh?"

Whilst Fenesis was unable to comprehend at all, Kusla pointed at the bellows beside him, and gave a little smile with some meaning behind it.

"NOT HOT ENOUGH!!"

Wayland's roar came from upstairs.

Whenever Fenesis heard this line, she would grit her teeth, curl up, and squat down.

BUT she was not cringing in fear because of the sudden roar, but that she was too light, and that she did not have enough strength. If she did not do this, she could not use the bellows.

"Uuu..."

Her face reddened, and she groaned as she used all her strength to press the bellows down, pull it open, and press in down. Kusla however was watching her work with a relaxed look on his face.

"I think that's a little too much! This seems to be used for refining iron."

Amongst all the metal refining processes, the highest temperature that was needed to be maintained would be for iron. A large amount of air had to be drawn into the bellows, but there was no need for such a high temperature when refining zinc.

"...,"

"For Clergymen, perhaps constant prayer and faith will purify you, but in our line of occupation, we have to keep sweating."

"...!"

Fenesis glared at Kusla, *please do not say such things to me now*, her eyes were ostensibly saying this. Her face turned red, and she was starting to pale everywhere else.

She probably had anemia.

"KUSLA!"

At this moment, Wayland's anxious yell came from above, but Fenesis could not stand up after pressing the bellows down with her body. Kusla then carried her to the window, where it was cooler and breezy.

It seemed she could not breathe normally like usual, and she was panting, seemingly devoid of consciousness.

"Are you okay?"

Upon hearing Kusla's words, Fenesis merely widened her eyes slightly, but her eyes were not focused.

Kusla then patted her cheek gently a few times, and then stood up and rolled his sleeves.

"Heave-ho!."

And then, he pulled the large bellows open, before proceeding to press it down hard.

Air was immediately introduced into the furnace, and sparks flew.

"ARGH! HOT!!"

Upon hearing the holler from upstairs, Kusla cackled maliciously and continued introducing air into the furnace.

The large amount of air entered the large furnace, and it continued to burn inside, the cackling sounds ostensibly from the midst of Hell. the flying sparks flew by the hill of gathered materials, and the flames in the furnace turned from red to yellow, and then to white. There were a lot of superstitious people amongst the blacksmiths, but this phenomenon was such that even Alchemists, who were deemed eccentric by others, could not help but frown.

But for those who had witnessed it once personally, anyone could understand why.

It was literally sanctity.

The glow shining behind God must have been the same as the glow that comes when refining metal in the furnace at high temperatures, and Kusla certainly felt this way.

"Lead's starting to boil now. Is it not ready yet!?"

He opened the small metal window at the furnace's peephole, and found that there was some boiling in the crucible. The still unmelted parts were iron and other impurities.

"Almost done here! Keep it up for another half of a Spring Festival Prayer Song!"

"Got it!"

Kusla answered, and gradually cut back on the air volume introduced.

In metallurgy or other forms of work, the purpose of singing was to adjust the intervals and durations when air was introduced.

They could use a drip or an hourglass for this purpose, but when doing physical work, nobody would be bother to observe such minor changes. In this situation, singing would allow one to become happier when working.

Often, there would be Alchemists being reported to the Church for reciting some spells or some strange prayers in front of a furnace, but when dealing with a small fire and a small furnace, it would be better to sing softly.

After that, Kusla conversed with Wayland, who was upstairs, many time, and stopped introducing air at the anticipated moment when unvaporized lead ash would appear. The records Thomas let behind was most probably correct, and though there were some efforts, the firewood and charcoal did burn up at the same rate. After letting the furnace cool for a while, they just needed to obtain the cooled zinc crystals from the roof and the specially designed supply outlet to complete everything.

It seemed simple, but Kusla ended up sweating all over.

Good grief, just when he was sighing away, Fenesis finally regained consciousness.

"Looks like you won't become Saint Alkaniks."

"...?"

"That's a Saint who protected blacksmiths."

"..."

Fenesis showed a look of displeasure, but she stared beyond Kusla and to the furnace.

"Is it over?"

"Most of it."

"..."

Fenesis finally heaved a sigh of relief, and relaxed her body as she leaned on the wall.

"Can you stand up?"

"...Is there anything there needs to be done?"

Like a typical Sister, despite her being worn out due to her fatigue, she would continue to work obediently as long as it was not done. She was forcing herself to stand up, and though she was already staggering as she stood, but Kusla was still impressed by her willpower.

"There's a reward for you after such hard work. Let's go upstairs."

"Eh?"

Kusla first took off, and Fenesis held down this cloth armor draped on her with all her might as she followed.

They went upstairs, through the workshop filled with items all around, and opened a door inside. Standing in front of them was not a wall, but a protruded furnace and an aqueduct used to drive the waterwheel.

Kusla had grabbed a bottle of liquor as he passed through the workshop. And Wayland, who had already put on his shirt, was seated in front of the furnace.

"How's it?"

Wayland only seemed to have noticed them when he heard Kusla's question, and he turned around to give a suspicious look. Perhaps it was because when working, he would be so tense that he would go berserk even if there was only a breeze; the side effect of this was that once work was done, he would immediately revert back to being his useless self again.

He raised his chin. Normally the wind shaft that was also designed to be a peephole would have something like iron box that acted as a passage used for drawing air for cooling. Kusla then proceeded to look inside.

He then shrugged, and turned to look at Fenesis.

"Have a look."

"..."

"Don't sneeze."

"..."

She reverted back to that condescending look she once showed him, coupled with a skeptical look thinking she was duped again, and Kusla was unable to laugh at it.

"Zinc is very light, and can float in the air."

"...I will take note."

She said, and crouched down to look into the metal box.

She was then immediately taken aback by the stinging stench in the box, and inadvertently retreated.

She lifted her head and stared at Kusla and Wayland.

"It's pretty, isn't it?"

Fenesis did not answer as she gulped and looked into the box again. Behind her, Kusla handed the bottle to Wayland, and the latter proceeded to gulp it all down like he was drinking water.

There was a need to cool the metal box if they wanted to collect zinc efficiently, and the marks of water being splashed around it was the proof of the aftermath.

"This ore really is not bad. The Alchemist Rice Mitchenbelk said this once. Zinc is the Lama Philosonic, like a stem, and yet like a needle, and feels like a snowy white cotton."

"...Beautifully refined...but...there's still the weighing and analysis of the ash..."

"Leave it to me. If we're able to get this result in a pristine manner, it won't take too long to decipher it."

"That Thomas...really is a magician."

Wayland said, and laid down."

Magic, Fenesis reacted to this term and turned her head around, her face showing an expression of inexplicable confusion. She looked ready to cry, and yet about to laugh; an unstable emotion.

That emotion was probably 'excitement'.

"The ores dug from the ground can become like this one they're handled correctly."

Upon hearing Kusla's words, she seemingly staggered and looked over at the inside of the metal box, ostensibly attracted by it; it seemed she was unable to control the surprise within her.

"It'll be more touching if we can extract gold from lead ore."

"Eh, but, that is—"

Fenesis immediately turned her head around.

Kusla laughed, and said,

"Turning lead into gold? Hahaha. Lead will never become gold, but we can extract gold from lead ores. That's probably just some rumors a few vile Alchemists spread about and deliberately exaggerated."

"Though you have to use so—much lead ores just to extract this little bit of gold."

Wayland, lying on the floor, spread his arms wide to gesture, and finally shrank his reach to an extent of 2 fingertips.

"We're always doing this and that kind of metallurgical jobs."

"And we'll continue on."

It's just that simple, Kusla lowered his head and stared at Fenesis, whilst the latter, like a puppet with its strings snapped, "Haa", answered.

"Let's go upstairs. The temperature here will drop drastically. What about you?"

"Me? Lemme have one more swig of this~"

Wayland laid down on the floor as he stared into the metal box, and shook the liquor bottle in his hand.

Kusla then shrugged, patted Fenesis on her back shoulder, and called her up.

Unlike the outside, the inside of the workshop was still warm, and after closing the door inside, the flowing water splashing on the waterwheel seemed a little distant as the room suddenly quietened. At this point, Fenesis was like a converted believer who just witnessed a miracle as she looked stunned, her lips tightly sealed, unable to say a word. As they were on their way up the stairs to the bedroom, Kusla saw that her legs were still shuddering, and decided that there was no choice but to give her a hand.

"Are you touched somewhat?"

His tone was filled with some ridicule, but Fenesis continued to stare at him, and nodded her head slowly and deeply. Even when Kusla and Wayland were serving their apprenticeship, when they planned to poison that obnoxious master of theirs, they did see him smile once, but only once, and heard him say something nice.

That was when they succeeded in their experiment, when he was as moved as Kusla and Wayland were, whilst the latter two were unable to say anything,

"Welcome to the world of an Alchemist."

Fenesis looked back and forth between Kusla's face and his outstretched hand, and it would be most appropriate to call her expression that of confusion.



After a while, she then tentatively, fearfully, grabbed him by the outstretched hand, slowly but firmly.

"But, well."

Kusla faced the table in the bedroom and said this whilst staring at Thomas' little universe. It seemed that to her, the meaning of the draws on the parchments were completely different from just a while ago.

"You're feeling it's a little pitiful, isn't it? We aren't able to do anything related to magic."

"Eh..."

It seemed Fenesis wanted to say something, but chose not to in the end, and kept her mouth shut.

"If there's nothing you can report to your superior, he won't be happy, I suppose?"

Wayland was enjoying the liquor in the inner room, and at this moment, Kusla realized he too was thirsty.

"I can report to them that you two have been drinking in the day."

"But the Church congregation also drinks."

"Please do not associate your excessive indulgence with the grape wine used for Eucharist. That is a sacrilege to God."

Kusla lowered his head forlornly; it seemed Fenesis was not really angry.

"But as compared to all the invigilators I've met up till now, you're a lot better than them."

"...Eh?"

"Those people never had the intention to understand our work. Your face shows an undisguised disgusted, but you did come with some basic knowledge and introductory books to read. You even dressed up like this, sweating so much and helping us press the bellows."

Upon seeing how she was dressed, Fenesis lowered her head a little embarrassedly.

"But do you find this enjoyable?"

Upon hearing Kusla's question, Fenesis lifted her head.

And then, she gave an unwilling smile.

"How touching."

"Right. It's so touching that you can give up on everything else. When the remaining knights stand on top of a hill, looking at the distant sunset, even when all the allies they fought alongside for years died, they can still reach the end of this day peacefully, or something like that."

"...King Kuzar's legend."

"Right. The truth is, hopes are everywhere."

Kusla poured some liquor into a glass, and said this as he raised it to his eyes.

"Alchemists are the light of truth."

Fenesis stared at Kusla, who was about to drink the liquor down, and ostensibly let out a deliberate sigh as she raised her eyes to look at him.

"This is impossible for someone who likes to lie, like you."

"...This line really sounds convincing from someone who's fooled so often like you."

Upon hearing Kusla's mocking, Fenesis inadvertently curled her lips, but gave a wry smile in the end.

"I shall report what happened today as it is."

"Whatever you wish then."

Kusla answered, but Fenesis continued to stare at him intently.

It really was an inexplicable expression, as he face showed what seemed a smile, and yet forlornness. "Hm?" Kusla could not help but ask.

Fenesis hesitated for a while, and then said softly,

"You...no, you people really live a free life."

The world was created by God, and in this world of order, the only ones who could truly obtain freedom was a king who had everything, or heretics that had nothing.

Naturally, Kusla and the rest could not be kings.

But even so, Fenesis' face showed envy when she said this, but her smile was riddled with lethargy.

"Aren't you?"

In a monastery, especially one affiliated to the Knights, there would naturally be nothing of the term 'freedom'. However, there was a freedom to choose whether to enter a monastery.

In response to Kusla's question, Fenesis did not meet him in the eyes as she wordlessly stood up.

"I'll go change my clothes."

"...Go ahead."

Kusla said as he placed his hands on his cheeks to twist his neck as he watched Fenesis enter the room at the side.

That night, Fenesis returned to the monastery, and Wayland was sleeping soundly due to the fatigue from the work in the day. Kusla filled a glass vessel with water, lit a candle that could float on it for lighting, and started reading Thomas' code.

There were a still pieces of parchment left, and using the results of the zinc refining and past results, Kusla would be able to find a way to refine iron with such high purity.

Even as the plants had rested, Kusla, as befitting of his title, did not feel tired at all.

Listed on the parchments were not simply some dry metallurgical results, but also some of Thomas' own feelings and thoughts being listed within. Kusla could tell, whilst reading between the lines, that Thomas had felt excitement from achieving some form of breakthrough through his many experiments.

The parchments only listed the final correct result, but one could definitely tell that in this workshop, he went through countless hardships and numerous sufferings, but never gave up, never wavered, and was focused on heading to his goal.

Naturally, Kusla did not know how Thomas died.

But if he were to guess based on his opinion, it would not be a far stretch to think that Thomas, upon achieving iron of such purity, drank too much in his exhilaration, and got involved in some meaningless scuffle.

These parchments clearly listed the excitement he felt that time, and it could be felt despite his calm handwriting and conservative choice of words. Kusla took a deep breath, and the unique smell the parchments had entered his nose.

He too was infected by Thomas' excitement.

But what excited him more was that if they could attain a way to purify iron to such an extent, they might be able to find a way to Magdala. This was the biggest reason for Kusla, who betted his entire existence on it; no, the only reason why every Alchemist could insist on being one was to search for Magdala.

But one had to note that there had to be no mistakes in this process.

Kusla checked through the numbers and codes several times, opened an old book, and compared it to the other books left in Thomas' workshop as he deciphered it.

And so, once this line appeared, his mind went blank for a short moment.

He backtracked a few times, deciphered the codes, reinspected the metallurgical outcome used for solving the secret, and affirmed it again.

Even so, the deciphered result was the same.

It was neither his own mistake, nor that he saw this mistakenly.

Once there were two parchments left, there was this last line.

"God's...Forgiveness?"

A trivial detail caused the entire meaning to change.

Kusla put down his pen and got up from his chair.

And it was soon after that Wayland flared up like a drunkard and flipped up from the bed.

Act 4

"So you immediately came over to me?"

In the office, Post left the parchments on the table and asked Kusla.

Kusla and Wayland spent the entire previous night deciphering the contents of the parchments, and Kusla had transferred the results to the Baggage Corps' Headquarters.

As they had expected, the deciphered line was about begging for God's forgiveness.

At this point, Kusla's group still could not decipher the content of the last two parchments, but amongst the ones they deciphered, there was a paragraph regarding the refining of pyrite.

Normally, pyrite would hardly be used, for it contained an excessive amount of sulfur, and would only be appropriate in certain unique situations. But if the results recorded on the parchments were correct, one could use pyrite to make that extremely pure iron.

But speaking of which, metallurgical research was basically probing into the dark, a darkness where one did not realize what he would be getting into.

It would be impossible to know when he would meet a toxic material nobody knew of, or a sudden explosion of an experimental drug.

Such unknowns would also be applied to the experiments Alchemists carry out.

And they had always followed God's teachings in their experiments, until the moment when they suddenly deviated from it.

What is awaiting me? Heaven or Hell?

When people were confronted with such an issue, the majority would choose a more conservative approach.

"Where's the other one?"

"Wayland's tired and sleeping."

Post let out a deep sigh, releasing as much air as that of a bellow.

It seemed it was out of habit, but he rubbed his eyes, and the small eyes on his pudgy face were staring at Kusla,

"So these are the remaining parchments?"

"Yeah. But since the code used to write it is unknown to us, we can't decipher the content within."

"Can you guess whether it's something extremely abnormal?"

"At least it's something that'll make someone beg God for forgiveness."

After Kusla's reiterated explanation, Post's face puckered.

It seemed the reason why he wanted to confirm this again was that it was just as he had guessed.

"...It's better for you to know this."

He said.

"Eh?"

"I'm talking about the cause behind Thomas' death."

"That's..."

Kusla asked, and in response, Post showed a depressed look.

—I want to believe him until the end, but the conclusion is that he is a traitor.

Anyone who had worked in the line of alchemy would definitely have seen such an expression several times.

"Before Thomas died, the Choir's people once visited him."

Kusla, however, was hardly surprised by this.

"We did find out that the Choir really had an encounter with him, but we just could not figure out why they did so. At that time, we thought that Thomas was not a heretic in their eyes."

Upon hearing this, Kusla nodded in affirmation for the first time.

Alchemists were not necessarily about delving into the madness of their occupation, as was commonly thought of; their madness, however, was about their way of life.

"We just thought that those people had some suspected there was some hidden secret behind Thomas' miraculous metallurgical skills, but he died in the end. After that, we investigated the Choir, but there was no evidence we could gather. I thought...that was just a mere coincidence."

Post again rubbed his eyes as he said this.

"It seemed their noses are rather sharp..."

"Then, what is the reason exactly?"

Kusla was certainly not a fool with an empty brain,

However, he remained silent, waiting for the other party to personally state the truth.

"You have some hidden depth within you, for sure. I'll just say this then. That method's definitely not something that can be revealed the the public."

Post glanced down at the parchments on the table,

His expression was that of someone who lost the life of a capable subordinate because of a little failure.

"Thomas' killer is undoubtedly one of the Knights' Choir."

"...And the invigilator is sent here for this reason?"

"I guess so. This place is still within my jurisdiction, so at least the people and property affiliated to the Knights are under my control. Those people from the Choir sent someone here even after knowing it'll set up a conflict against me, and there must have been something they were planning. And so, that was it."

There were still many techniques that were sealed before they were revealed to the world, like a technique that would directly defy the Church's principles, or a technique that would benefit the enemy, for examples. Kusla personally knew of some of those.

The common theme about these techniques were that to the political stage, they were more dangerous than any natural calamities. To the people monitoring the Knights' Alchemists, keeping them a secret was a cardinal sin, let alone researching on it.

Whether Thomas had intent to do it or not, he had chanced upon a forbidden technique, and the Choir first realized it. One could imagine that Thomas felt the other party would not take direct action, and proposed some sort of deal, only to meet the fate of death. the Choir was a philosophically radical organization, and would frequently involve itself in a battle.

In other words, all suspicious people were to be killed.

And all the people who did not follow them were also to be killed.

If there had been a wise advice that Thomas could have used, it would be that no matter who he had revealed this to, he should have informed Post first-hand.

Alchemists could not survive on the world alone.

Once an Alchemist mistook his shelter, they would end up sinking in the large cauldron called Alchemy.

"But my view is that though they had killed Thomas, they don't know what sort of clues he would have left behind, and they had to send in someone into the workshop to investigate. I have to clear up the workshop before I find out who the real murderer is, and find a successor to the skills Thomas left behind. Thinking about it even as an enemy however, I'm rather impressed that the Choir elaborately chose the little girl to be an invigilator."

"Elaborately?"

"Right. They sent a young, low ranking Sister into a workshop, on the preface that she's just gaining experience for a real dangerous invigilation job. Since there's nothing I have to be guilty about on my side, I have to accept their request without conditions. However, the problem is a girl of that age is as pious as a fanatic; as long as the monastery gives the command, she'll probably start looking for whatever they want, like a well-trained dog."

Kusla recalled their first meeting, and she did seem to give the vibe Post had described of. Also, he recalled that melancholy shown on her sidelong expression.

"As my insufficient protection of the Knights' possession, Thomas, led to his death, I don't feel fearful or uneasy in them; even if the assassin came from within the Knights, my thoughts will never change, because my duty includes ensuring Thomas' safety from those people."

Post said, and closed his eyes.

"However, I'm feeling upset that those narrow-minded people, who did not understand the importance of an Alchemist, single-mindedly followed God's teachings, and killed a valuable talent in Thomas, for his research was a taboo. Besides, their true objective was probably to get the evidence and increase their control over the Alchemists."

The reason why the Knights did not have to worry about hunger, and why the pilgrims, who only knew how to pray, could continue to live their peaceful lives of prayer, was all because of Post's Baggage Corps earning money in the town. The duty of a Knight was to wage war, and Alchemists were a valuable group of people in the Crusade, as the techniques they develop would be able to allow for much cost saving.

In fact, not a lot of people amongst the Knights understood the importance of an Alchemist,

And people would naturally despise Alchemists,

Especially when things were going well.

Those in authority would fall into such shallow thinking too, and their thoughts would be similar to that of the Choir.

"Thus, I have to make a very tough decision."

Post widened his eyes, and stared at Kusla.

Alchemists had to deceit, threaten others, and cover themselves with terror and secret veils to ensure their survival. The world of merchants however was different; and those within this world thrived on exploiting their peers.

Post, who managed to amass such a vast fortune in this world, was staring at Kusla.

And Kusla knew the other party was not someone who could be handled easily with just a few tricks, and randomly stretched his back.

"I think I better keep the last two just in case."

"T-This is—"

"Right, they may never meet the light of day again."

Post's face contorted; it was the expression of someone who was weighing something that could not be weighed.

"But if this can save the majority of the Alchemists, I won't mind being hated by you."

"..."

"The Knights have grown too big, and is growing stronger because of the war. The era of unscrupulous means had passed. Of course, War isn't something gentle; the Knights headquarters however is gradually growing distant from that War, and unfortunately, there's no buzz of War to be heard there."

Creation, growth, expand, self-protection.

This was an inevitable, constant process for any organization.

"The bloody events are not suitable to be revealed to the entire world, and right now, you must have been feeling repulsed about the higher ups. However, you people have to survive, for the sake of the Knights, and for yourself."

Kusla could not argue at all, and remained silent.

Post personally felt silence was consent.

"I have to respect you for being honest about such matters with me, and I'll try my best to give privileges to you. As for how you remove the tag associated with you, that will come later, so just wait. I'll assist you fully, for it's a reward a loyal person like you so get."

It was simply some appealing words, but simply put, those were just to shut him up.

But Kusla could not refuse Post at that time.

Thomas' research was completely laid out on the parchments, and the parchments were laid out on Post's desk.

Kusla narrowed his eyes, and stared at something that was more distant than a strait.

"It's been tough on you."

This line signified the end of this conversation.

Kusla bowed towards Thomas, and left the office.

Once he stepped out of the room, he inadvertently let out a sigh.

He already made some guesses on the likely possibilities before this.

And so,

Once he walked out from Post's room, he turned a corner around the long corridor, and saw Wayland staring at him with an emotionless expression.

"Empty-handed~"

Wayland, who had taken a slight nap, still seemed deprived of sleep, and his haphazard attire made him resemble a beggar.

"He took them away too."

Upon hearing that, Wayland snorted, immediately left the wall he was leaning on, and followed Kusla.

"What do we do next~...?"

Even in the midst of a quiet room, Alchemists would speak softly, whether it was indoors or outdoors.

For no one knew who would be eavesdropping.

"We're Alchemists. What can we do?"

The Knights gave them their workshop, the Knights gave them ample funding, and the Knights were the ones who gave them ample protection and allowed them to escape from the Church's heretical inquisition. The Craftsmen in the town had borrow money to maintain their work, and forfeit the secrets of their workshop, which had lasted for generations, to the Alchemists.

Thus, as for the Alchemists, who had much more to thank the Knights for as compared to the Craftsmen, who knew how much they had to kowtow?

"...Kusla?"

"We've already decided on what we have to do."

There were green trees, dauntless in the face of this frigid cold, in the middle of the wide courtyard.

Kusla stared at the trees outside the window, and then looked back at Wayland.

"We're always resolved to do what we have to do."

"!"

"You've made a copy of it beforehand, right?"

Wayland's hand was covered in ink, and there were thick black rings hanging around his eyes.

"We're Alchemists. Nobody can stop us from pursuing the path to Magdala ."

"That's how it is~"

Wayland grinned as he said this, "However—" he continued,

"Nn?"

"I'm a little worried about something."

Wayland said as he looked at the courtyard.

"Worried?"

Kusla asked, and followed Wayland's stare.

"What do we do about her~?"

Wayland shrugged slightly.

"It's obvious from what I see that her role as an invigilator is the content of the parchments."

"Naturally, we have to deceive her."

Kusla felt there was no other way than to do this.

He looked at Wayland with a matter-of-fact expression, and saw the latter give a sarcastic smile as he patted Kusla on the back, and walked out.

"I'm going back to the workshop first~"

Wayland waved his hand whilst his back was turned towards Kusla.

And the latter, who was left behind, wanted to nag a few words at the leaving back profile, but stopped himself.

For he realized this was Wayland's way of focusing on his job.

And so, Kusla's stare turned towards the courtyard,

And found Fenesis, sitting under a shelter in the middle of the frigid cold.

It was only until Kusla reached her that Fenesis lifted her head.

She narrowed her eyes, probably because of the incoming morning sun.

"Ah..."

And once she found it was Kusla, she hurriedly rubbed her eyes and snorted.

"What are you doing here?"

"Wh-What I do has nothing to do with you!"

Fenesis was seated in the pavilion in the middle of the Knights Headquarters Courtyard, close to the room where Kusla and Post had their conversation, and she resembled a young lady from a village out at work, almost overwhelmed by the hard work.

While she was trying to get on her feet, she staggered due to her lightheadness.

Kusla hurriedly supported her, and was surprised to realize how cold her body was.

It seemed she had been out here for quite a long time.

"I thought you've already went to the workshop."

"...Th-Then why are you here?"

"To me, it's a basic of basic things to say some greetings to my master when there's something on."

Once Kusla said this, Fenesis showed a bitter look on her face.

"Well, I guess that's not your style."

And Fenesis lowered her head further.

"I guess that talk yesterday about being free was all just a joke."

"..."

"They forbade you from approaching us Alchemists, and made you recall your mission, am I correct?"

Looking at Fenesis' personality, it seemed she had reported everything the previous day, "*It is rather interesting to work together with an Alchemist*" and she probably said something like this.

Naturally, Fenesis did not complete the mission that was expected of her.

She even took part in the recovery of Thomas' metallurgical records, which the Choir had viewed as a taboo. It was not hard to imagine how furious her superior was back then.

"Since you know that...please do not ask."

"Hm? It's not good to be caught slacking here, waiting for something to fall. You'll catch a cold too."

"..."

Kusla nudged Fenesis from behind, and she hesitated for a little while before taking the first step forth.

"Speaking of which, results are certainly like that in some way."

"...What do you mean?"

Both of them passed through the courtyard and corridors, and left the Baggage Corps Headquarters, not meeting anyone in the way.

Normally, this residence should be a place where the staff members would pass by often, but perhaps it was overly spacious that Kusla felt this place was quiet every time he came by.

In the midst of this silence, he hurriedly tried to make his mind click.

He wanted to find a way to bamboozle Fenesis and misguide her.

He could not allow for Thomas' research results to be kept secretive because of some political reasons.

"The higher ups believe that the more they crush and destroy, the more rewards they'll get."

"..."

Fenesis lifted her eyes, stared at Kusla, and curled her lips unhappily.

"I am really foolish for letting my guard down after hearing your words."

"Do you think I'm bluffing you again?"

"Am I wrong?"

Upon seeing the girl give a defiant look at him, Kusla could not help but chuckle.

Unlike her appearance, Fenesis' stare did not have any meaning at all.

At this point, he realized the distance between them was closed quite a bit.

"I'm not fooling you, but us Alchemists would often do some things beyond our superiors' expectations and mess with them completely. That's why I find it amusing to see someone endure all this pressure from a superior."

"..."

"Are you that scared of failing your superior's expectations?"

Fenesis really wanted to glare back at Kusla, but she failed.

They stepped out of the compound, and arrived in the bustling town, full of life.

Kusla would sometimes wonder, that since there was a world distant from conspiracies and machiavellians, why did he choose to live such a way of life.

At this moment, there was the aroma of a roasted pork spit from around the corner. Kusla turned towards the origin of the smell, and said,

"Just top it off suitably and it'll be fine. That's how it works."

After this brief reply, he approached the stall as he was unable to control his urges, and bought two skewers. The delicious pork was dripping with oil, and it was a delicacy of the highest order when eaten in such cold weather. Fenesis remained where she was, watched Kusla stuff his cheeks with meat, and gave a condescending look, saying,

"My position is completely different from yours."

"Hm?"

Kusla held the skewer in his hand as he gave a puzzled look.

Fenesis did not hide the fury within her as she simply refused the invitation to eat meat.

"I am different from you."

She grabbed at her chest, ostensibly enduring the pain coming from her heart,

After finishing a skewer of meat, Kusla threw the bare skewer to a stray dog.

"Someone once said that the standard of deciding whether someone is to be a slave, is whether he had deemed himself to be a slave."

"..."

"I've no idea why are you so rigid in your thinking."

At the same time, Kusla had to find a way to open the eyes of the girl in front of him, make her continue to sleep on the chair, and not get in their way in the future.

Kusla quickly finished the second skewer, and felt a little thirsty. There was a large vat frothing with white vapor in the middle of this chilly day, providing warmth for the grape wine placed inside it. Kusla stopped in his tracks, stared at Fenesis, and pointed there.

Fenesis immediately frowned upon seeing this, but then immediately shook her head.

And then, she still nodded slightly in the end, ostensibly showing her own weakness.

"Praise be to God."

Kusla tapped at a wooden vessel lightly as he said this. Fenesis took a little sip from it, and then stared at the boiling grape wine with a blank expression. It seemed she was furious and forlorn over her own weakness.

Post was correct in his description, that Fenesis was a girl who was nothing other than being loyal, to a point where she would obediently follow the orders given to her without deviation; she could be said to be a classic case of a foolish believer, to a point of pity.

Kusla honestly could not understand what was spurring Fenesis on,

But despite this, he knew what he had to do.

That would be to convince Fenesis, who was lectured by her superior, feeling downhearted. He was to convince her to ignore her superior's orders. He felt she was being so stubborn for she had yet to see how the outside world was like.

Kusla then took a gulp of wine, glanced over at the proceeding crowd, and waited for Fenesis to calm down.

However, he felt something inexplicable for some reason.

For the truth was that if he just told any single line from the parchments to Fenesis, she would be able to complete her mission. He again pondered over this, and recognized how dangerously fragile the affairs of the world were.

A person's position would be changed drastically when one person knew the truth, and the other did not. Fenesis for example did not know anything, was scolded by her superior, and was in a corner of the courtyard, not knowing what to do.

However, the inexplicable thing was that those who knew the truth were just a step away from those who did not, and they could have reached their hands out.

Perhaps it was due to his nature as an Alchemist, but Kusla liked to carelessly tell others about what he knew. He thought of a reverie unrelated to himself, and gave a smirk on his lips. Just when he intended to wipe off that smirk with wine,

"You are really free."

Fenesis noted briskly.

"Hm?"

"I just said you are really free."

"..."

Kusla stopped his hand that was holding onto the wine, and was seriously wondering if he should abandon Fenesis and return back to the workshop.

"I suppose everyone has limits placed on them."

The crux would be how to work within them.

This was the self-confidence Kusla had managed to gain after having carved his own fate till this day, or so he thought.

He did not want to talk to anyone who only knew how to express their envy of others.

However, upon hearing Kusla's reply, Fenesis showed a tired smile on her face,

"That is not what I meant."

What do you mean? Kusla gave a questioning look as he looked over at Fenesis, and the latter took a little sip of wine before continuing,

"I asked others about Magdala."

"...Huh?"

"The Land of Magdala Alchemists sought after,"

Fenesis gave a smile, ostensibly astounded,

"And the stuff of dreams."

Her smile was practically an exact copy of Friche.

The latter had once laughed, saying that she felt it was cute how Alchemists had the habit of calling their dream the Land of Magdala.

"I think all of you are really, truly free, pursuing the Land of Magdala."

"All I hear are people calling us fools."

"I admit that I do not understand why would be blasphemy against God for the sake of your dream."

Fenesis said this in a somewhat delightful manner.

She looked rather unstable at this point, her face reddening, probably due to the wine she drank.

"But freedom is still freedom after all."

"Why?"

"Why...that is..."

Fenesis pressed her right hand on her cheek, and closed her eyes.

From her appearance, it seemed she was completely drunk.

However, the words she said sounded unexpectedly sober.

"For you can decide...how you will realize your dreams ."

"...That's some deep words."

"Please do not trivialize this. I am serious."

Fenesis glared at Kusla, but it did not last long. Her serious expression broke apart into a smile.

This caused Kusla to feel a little uneasy.

He was not worried that Fenesis was drunk, but that her thought process was a lot more complicated than he thought.

At this point, her smile was so uneasy, and this unnatural smile was definitely that of someone who had given up on everything.

"If I fail this mission, I will be kicked out of the monastery I used to stay in."

Fenesis let out hiccups as she drank, and the severe dissonance between her serious expression and relaxed tone rendered Kusla speechless.

"Are you wondering if I came to an Alchemist's workshop for this reason? Is that what you think?"

He felt a little unaccustomed to Fenesis being right on the mark, for she had always been so open to being teased, and would suspect things for some reason.

"I too felt it was strange, but even if there is another monastery that will take me in, I will soon be chased out. It has always been, and I guess you people are right...that it will always be this way."

Kusla could not interject,

And Fenesis did not intend to stop.

"I came from a place near you, a land where the people here call the 'Promised Land'."

Kusla was really shocked to hear this, and turned aside to look at Fenesis, who smiled as she continued to stare at the crowd that was passing through.

"That's true...I never heard of the name Fenesis here."

"That is from a land in the Far East."

Fenesis narrowed her eyes, and showed a reminiscing look.

Upon hearing this from her, Kusla felt that the girl called Fenesis had a layer of robes peeled off from her.

"So you're a convert."

Fenesis shuddered slightly, and then immediately lifted her face to give a relaxed smile.

"I am an ex-Pagan young girl who cannot be trusted. That was how I was seen no matter where I went."

Upon hearing this expected answer, Kusla looked away.

"But in fact, I was never a Pagan right from the beginning. During the many years where war decimated the land, my tribe was a group of nomads, with cursed blood in us. It was said that even during peaceful times, we would be executed under various dubious reasons. In the Crusade, the hunting was accelerated, and our tribe died one after another in our escape, until I was the only one left alive by the time I arrived at the last town."

No matter which country, region or settlement it was, there were definitely who were ostracized for all sorts of various reasons, probably because of their past crimes, or that they once did something that was despised by others.

In this land, the locals would call the people from the East Pagans, and that was deemed as more than enough reason to doubt them.

The reason why Fenesis was accepted into the monastery was also probably because it was a case of profit and loss arithmetic to the Knights. It would be easy to use her as a disposable tool.

However, if that was the case, there would be a basic form to this topic at hand. Kusla frowned, and gulped down some wine; he was able to see where this conversation was headed.

"So, just when I finally arrived at that town, it seemed I was about to be killed. At that time, there was no one who would save us, and I thought I would not be able to escape any further. However,"

"The Knights saved you."

"..."

Fenesis was a little surprised.

However, she quickly showed a gentle smile, for it seemed she was able to treat Kusla as someone who understood her.

For they were both people who were ostracized by society.

"Yes."

Fenesis answered, like a girl admiring someone, affirming his existence.

And her expression was clearly showing that he was absolutely correct."

"Even after knowing of my cursed heritage, their behavior towards me never changed. They treated me as someone important, and did everything they could to allow me to escape safely. Nobody else had cared for me so much."

It was practically the description of a pure Knight in an Epic.

At this same time, this was vastly different from the Knights in Kusla's impression..

He thought the Knights merely viewed Fenesis as a prize of war,

They would naturally take care of he, for the more intact a beautiful haul was, a higher price could be fetched.

"At that time, I felt accepted for the first time in life."

However, it seemed Fenesis' understanding was far different from reality.

And yet Kusla did not have the courage to tell her the truth.

"After that, I was left to a monastery affiliated to the Knights. At that time, I was happy to get along with so many nice people, and what I saw, what I heard were all so new. I was happy, I enjoyed myself..."

And so, Fenesis lowered her stare, indulging in her own memories.

And in contrast, Kusla's expression became empty, bit by bit, not because he felt Fenesis was innocent for having such a blissful misunderstanding,

But because he understood how unfortunate she was not to have any of that.

"However, the reality was that I was being supervised every single moment."

Only when she showed a smiling face after saying that did she look refreshed and healthy.

But would that be more unhealthy?

"But as long as I can finish this mission, maybe..."

"You never thought of running away?"

The moment Kusla asked this, Fenesis showed a tragic smile.

Her expression seemed to have the realization, *I really am a fool here, am I not?*

"Just like how I do understand Alchemists, I suppose you will not be able to understand me. I do not want to be alone, I want them to recognize me as a friend. I have nowhere else to go, only the Knights who have saved me. If I am expelled from here, I will really be alone."

Fenesis said softly, and her hands, which were holding onto the wooden vessel, shuddered, causing some wine to spill from it. Her face was red as she was drunk, and her eyes looked a little unfocused as she lifted her face.

It seemed she was only able to say this because she was drunk.

Kusla took away the wine in her hands, and poured it onto the road.

He saw that she looked a little dazed, on the verge of tears.

"Sorry, I asked too much."

Once Kusla said that, it seemed her stare was all fuzzy as she frowned.

"I shouldn't have ask about something that can't be solved."

"..."

Fenesis looked at Kusla, her expression a little hapless.

"So even an Alchemist, who can change lead into gold, cannot do anything?"

Perhaps deep inside, she wanted to learn from the Alchemists, well-versed in worldly affairs, and find a way to escape from her own predicament.

Fenesis knew how much peril there was in an alchemist's workshop, but dared to take the risk. She probably did so just for the glimmer of expectations.

However, that expectation was that of a girl who did not know anything about the world.

"Turning lead into gold is just a legend. In fact, there's some gold composition in lead itself."

Kusla and the rest of the Alchemists would always make their decisions cautiously before doing anything, and would linger in it, sewing things up in the process.

Once they had arrived at their conclusions, they would continue to work on. The moment they failed to do this, it meant their hearts as Alchemists would have ceased; they would lose their freedom to head to the land of Magdala, and they would die.

There was no gold that existed in this world, only the land of Magdala.

"Right, let's return to the workshop. There's still some fun out there."

Kusla patted Fenesis on the shoulder and casually got up as if they never talked about such a different issue. The latter however looked up at Kusla, ostensibly staring at a cold-blooded onlooker for leaving her like this

However, she quickly lowered her head, and staggered to her feet. Every betrayal, every harm done to her, every killing had yet to stop her from moving from town to town. The real misfortune to her would be the purity that would not fade in her, even after the countless hideous acts she went through, that she was not able to become a sly snake.

"So turning lead into gold is just a legend, huh?"

"Right, but every Alchemist knows the principle behind it, so that can't be considered a legend, but a 'lie'."

Fenesis was swaying from side to side, probably due to being tipsy on her feet.

Kusla felt unnerved by this, and lent her a hand, which she proceeded to grab.

It was hard to imagine, given her scarily undoubting personality, that she had such a past history of being suspected and ostracized by others.

He knew this was what she meant despite not knowing how to coax others,, but could only helplessly watch herself be troubled, as her tipsyness, uneasiness and the unknown future crushed her completely at this point.

But sometimes, such people were the only one who would callously state the cold truth,

"...You know you are only lying to yourself, right?"

Kusla held Fenesis' petite body, burning slightly in his arms, and walked on the path leading to the workshop. He felt there was a fragile sense to this soft body, that it would break if he tried to snap it.

If he were to tell Fenesis just a line about the records Thomas left behind, she would be able to finish her mission safely.

Would the Knights change their view of her?

He thought they would.

The Knights were a practical organization, rewarding people based on their contributions; they would reward any person useful to them, even if it was an Alchemist. This was the spell Kusla had, which would turn the fountain of lead Fenesis was to be drowned into, into a throne of gold.

But he did not say anything, for the results would be certain if he were to weigh the results of Thomas' metallurgical records with Fenesis' matters. No matter how young she was, how much one wanted to protect her, there was no way it would weigh heavier than the metallurgical records on the scale.

Whether it was rationally, or emotionally.

Fenesis, who had assistance, would definitely leapt into his arms to remove the loneliness she felt up till this point, and it would not be difficult to gain affection from her.

Besides, she was not a vile lady, and though she would react if there was childish teasing, she would definitely accept him as an Alchemist if he was honest with her. At this age, most of the people could not live for long, and it seemed age would not be a major problem.

If possible, Kusla wanted to save her and keep her with him.

However, the moment he thought of this, he would recall the sight of seeing the Knights scurrying around, looking for Friche's body. At that time, he could see her collarbone from beyond those savage back profiles. The bones of humans were white, but Friche's bones seemed whiter than others.

At that time, he did not feel sadness or anger. "If human bones have such a unique color, will there be a different outcome if I use it to replace dog bones?", that was the only thought he had in his mind.

Once he realized this, he really felt he was a lunatic inside, and yet proud of himself, relieved that he was a first-rate Alchemist. From that moment, he could prove that no matter when it was, even if a lover was killed in front of his eyes, he could keep thinking of metallurgy, and even swear to God over it.

Thus, he never thought of helping Fenesis.

He even forbade himself from doing so.

If this kept up, he was convicted that he would do something to Fenesis at some random moment. Whilst Wayland like to woo the ladies, he killed the monastery abbot to save the Sisters; Kusla however would simply put the bones of a Saint into the fire for his own sake.

He never thought of anyone as important, that they were all materials for metallurgy, tools that were to be used.

Merely a stepping stone to the Land of Magdala, whether it was by day or by night.

His unhuman-like master was the one who observed his behavior, and gave him the name of Kusla.

—You really are a living embodiment "{{Furigana|Interest|Kusla|margin=12}}", the kind of high interest that pairs together with the heartless ticking of the clock, that sucks the living blood out of those already in debt...but that's the right path to be an Alchemist.

When deciding on who was to be Fenesis' friend or foe, Kusla created an exaggerated, heinous lie to lower her view on Wayland, and be closer to him. However, while Fenesis had relied on him due to her fear of Wayland, Kusla was the heretic who would rip a fetus from a pregnant mother for experimenting without remorse.

Turning lead into gold, and gold into lead.

It was a given that things change instantly in the world. For people to not stray from the path, they need a form of reliance; just like how Fenesis chose to live with the Knights to ease her loneliness, Kusla was obsessed with the Land of Magdala. Both of them were similar in such ways, but no matter how much he wanted to reach his hand out to save others, there was no way he could do so himself.

For he was the one who needed saving more than others.

So how would he have the strength to help others?

By the time both of them returned to the workshop, Fenesis had completely fallen unconscious. Kusla cradled her onto the bed and draped a blanket over her. She still had a bitter expression on her face, and it did not seem to be due to the liquor only.

He felt she had a pretty sleeping face, and on that note, found her cute.

However, Friche was no inferior to her in this aspect. so there was no reason to give Fenesis any special treatment.

It was the same as meeting an injured kitten on the roadside.

It was not practical to save it even if he could not do so.

Kusla caressed Fenesis on the cheek, returned back to the living room, and saw Wayland seated on a chair, his knees tucked in while staring at a piece of paper..

"Do you know what interests me about you, Kusla~?"

"Huh?"

"There's never a dull moment from you~."

He looked back and grinned, showing a smile that was definitely not of friendship.

But a smile that was ostensibly in response to seeing an interesting mineral.

"Interest means usage value."

"And usage value means a meaning to existence~."

Wayland stared at the duplicates that were no different to the parchments in Post's hands, and grinned as he concluded. Kusla had the same view as he did.

"Can you control her?"

"I will."

"Isn't that right? No matter what troubles that young lady has, a Kusla will not treat her as a human."

Wayland's eyes were giving of a look of admiration.

There was once a Clergyman who said that humans will be crushed by the gears, that everything in this world can be explained through ethics and gears."

"Humans are also made of all sorts of materials, just a complicated water car."

"I once saw a mechanical clock in a Southern workshop. That thing—"

Wayland said,

"Was just like Interest."

The Alchemist with such a given name shrugged, and looked down at the piece of paper with the undried ink.

"Let's hurry and publish the results. I don't want others to find out."

"Isn't that so~? Wouldn't it be a pity to abandon the miracle written on this record?"

"Yeah. It'll be a nice farewell to our predecessor Thomas."

Upon hearing Kusla say this, Wayland lifted his head and smirked.

Kusla understood the reason for that though,

And did not feel displeased about the latter's attitude.

"The theologist, Saint Rizlo once said that sinners are suffering not because they don't have any humanity in them, but that—"

"They still have a trace of humanity left in them."

Wayland seemed to have found a most interesting way to play a toy as his eyes were dazzling.

Kusla's bitter expression seemed to be giving him delight.

The reason why Wayland saved the Sisters was probably because he wanted to see the Sisters suffer in their struggle between their faith and their lust.

"You're a blockhead of iron."

"Sturdy, beautiful, but hardly used for fighting."

Wayland got up from the chair and stretched his back.

This was not a worker's workshop, where the disciples were told to stay up and remain vigil.

Wayland showed no signs of fatigue at all, and even looked excited.

"There's a need to add some impurities, whether it's to forge iron into swords or smith them into axes. So, if there's an impurity within you, Kusla, what will you become?"

"If that happens, I'll let you test me for chopping through."

"Hoho, won't that be interesting~?"

Wayland said as he took the duplicate, and proceeded downstairs.

Kusla, having been left alone, gave a sigh and proceeded down after him.

Fenesis woke up in the afternoon.

Her body was still a little wobbly, and she hardly spoke, probably because of what happened before.

There was grain porridge and cheese for lunch, but she was squirming as she ate.

Kusla did not bother with her too much as he merely continued his work. Naturally, it included regaining the metallurgical research contents.

They did not keep their work hidden from Fenesis, for she and the rest had not noticed what they were pursuing were hidden in Thomas' metallurgical records.

If Fenesis' side had known that the information they wanted was within Thomas' metallurgical records, there would be no reason they would have done something already. Before then however, Kusla's group hoped to steal this secret before they understood the importance of it.

In other words, Fenesis' group had no grasp on what information Thomas was hiding.

They had to comprehend Thomas' metallurgical records, which they had left with Post before Fenesis and the rest could.

Once they memorized everything, they would have to burn it into ash at all costs, and leave no evidence behind.

Without getting in Post's way, they would maintain Thomas' accomplishment, and take a large step closer to Magdala.

But there were some concerns. After hearing Fenesis' words, Kusla thought that he would be guilt-stricken for hiding the truth, but in fact, that was not the case. He did not feel anything even when facing Fenesis, who was sitting idly on the table.

This caused him to feel realized and wry within.

Since he had made it all the way here, he should be able to continue from now.

"Erm."

Just when he was pondering over this, Fenesis' voice suddenly rang.

He looked back, and saw Fenesis tugging at her robes with a bitter look on her face.

"I am sorry..."

Kusla stared at Fenesis, removed the weights off the scale, and said,

"I didn't think you'll get drunk there."

"!"

She gasped.

Kusla again turned his head aside, and this time, she looked ready to cry as she showed a pained expression.

"You've been putting up with it in all sorts of ways, right? It must have been hard for you for the first time."

"..."

"Well, instead of drinking wine again the next time and vomiting here and there...I'll advise you not to drink again, and change your current lifestyle."

He replaced the weights, and placed a dull golden mineral on the other plate of the scale.

"But in this world, it's hard to start afresh."

Kusla turned his head back for the third time, and found that Fenesis had lowered her head.

It was really embarrassing for an invigilator to fall drunk in front of the ones she was supposed to be watching over, and even brazenly talk about her past. He did not think she was acting that time, but it did not matter even if he was fooled.

"Don't mind, I won't tell my superior everything."

Upon hearing Kusla tease her, Fenesis clicked her tongue as she remained rooted.

To a normal Clergyman, this must have been a terrible form of torture. She, who was watching over someone to determine if that person had done something vile, ended up having that person close an eye towards her own failure. In this sense, she was still a normal Clergyman.

She shuddered, but the fault was on her part to begin with.

"Well, I don't think that's a completely bad thing though."

"...?"

Fenesis, who was almost crushed by the self-loathing, stared at Kusla with dull eyes.

Kusla nodded slightly, and said,

"I don't hate the look of seeing a maiden suffer. My view of you has improved now."

"..."

Fenesis did not know what to say, or even what expression to show, as she was at a complete loss.

In the end, she was unable to control her impulses, and her lips turned into a smile as she said, unwilling to admit defeat,

"I-I said that I would never ever believe you again."

"Well, I'm a liar anyway. I only know how to lie."

"Since you are aware of it, why do you lie all the time?"

"That's interesting."

"What is it?"

"I said that I'm a liar, but why do you believe in the part where I said I'm a liar?"

Upon hearing Kusla's words, Fenesis was flabbergasted,

"Huh?"

I'm a liar, so I only know how to lie. But if this line was logical, would it not mean that the liar Kusla said a truth? If this line was a lie however, Kusla would not be a liar.

Fenesis let out a vague groan "Ahh...um...", and tilted her head about with a funny squeamish look on her face. Kusla chuckled upon seeing this, and at this moment, she realized she was fooled again. With a blushing face, she got up from the chair.

"W-What did you do to me again? What is going on here?"

"Turn lead into gold, and gold into lead; turn lies into truths, and truths into lies."

"Uu..."

Fenesis let out a groan again, and Kusla removed the pyrite scraps from the scale and said,

"What is it?"

".....What about that?"

After a long pause between, Fenesis raised her eyes at Kusla and asked this.

"Are you still troubled over your failure?"

"..."

She remained rooted, looking like a cat woken up by something pricking its nose.

"Human troubles are mostly of one type. Whatever you think, it's normal."

Fenesis again showed a defiant expression, but more than that, she hated to be told off by Kusla for such a reason.

"But speaking of which."

Kusla spoke on, and whilst Fenesis jerked back for some reason, he continued with his explanation.

"A problem that leaves a deep impression is still as such, and it hurts to feel as though you don't have a single friend."

"...Eh?"

"When you've gotten tired of this world of prayer, you can come over to our side. You've had some enjoyable experiences, right?"

He showed a smiling face to Fenesis, though it was obviously forced.

Fenesis did not know if it was a lie or truth.

But it did not matter at this point.

After a little hesitation, she seemed to be amazed by herself as she said,

"Even though I know it is a lie...it is useless to treat me kindly."

Kusla did not want to consider if it was a lie.

There was nothing true in this world.

But even so, the only affirmation he had left was the Land of Magdala.

When brass and pyrite ores are placed side by side, it is practically impossible to differentiate them.

It may be more difficult when gold is compared with them.

But once they are processed, both would show vast differences.

Pyrite would be a lot more difficult to process as compared to brass.

Once the bell chime indicating nightfall rang, the messenger bringing Fenesis back would arrive punctually, and Fenesis looked a little better as she returned.

After seeing Fenesis off, Kusla and Wayland began their discussions fully.

"Looks like we have to do this at night, huh~?"

But even so, what they knew were rather similar.

And soon, they came to a conclusion.

"So playing around with the vent won't wor?"

"I thought we could direct all the fumes into the water wheel, but thinking about it, it'll drastically change the conditions inside the furnace due to poor exhaust."

"But it's impossible to hide the stench of sulfur..."

"Then we can only work at night and finish before the people wake up. That kid's watching over us during the day too."

They had to work at night after all.

But there was a problem.

Pyrite ore would mostly break down into iron, but it would take quite a while to refine it into metal. During that time, they had to remove the impurities, adjust the temperature of the furnace with someone supervising the entire time.

A person could only stay awake throughout the nights for at most 2, 3 days.

During the day, they had to do their day work to misdirect, and while it would work on Fenesis, they could not get Post suspicious. Post was someone who was really sticking his head out for an Alchemist, and he would seal any form of knowledge that would get anyone hanged as a result. Of course, that was enough motivation for Kusla's group to not let this be known, and it would be bad for them if he got suspicious.

However, it would take too much of their working time to clean up the furnace, vents and equipment after every work.

"Looks like we're left with two options, huh~?"

"Either we go all in...or we just work through it during the day?"

Kusla looked aside, but Wayland did not meet him in the eyes as he nodded away.

"If we do it during the day, we can more or less finish it all within two days~...I think."

"But there'll be people watching, or smelling it."

There were many ways to fool Fenesis, but the problem was once the stench of sulfur was developed, there was no doubt it would reach Post's ears as rumors. In that situation, their intention to continue researching into Thomas' metallurgical records would be made known.

"Well, looks like we can only do it at night~"

Wayland said as he took a bite off some oat bread for dinner. It seemed it was because such bread was filling, and cheap, that he liked this food, though it was as hard as rock.

"Looks like we have to arrange the order of our research and set up a schedule. It'll be all for naught if we can't finish heating before daybreak."

"Yes."

Wayland nodded, and Kusla used a piece of paper, rather than a piece of parchment, to write down the necessary steps required. Thomas' records were eerily precise, and both of them took down the amount of time required with much ease.

However, refining iron was not a simple process as it seemed. The longer they continued to work, the chances of their intentions being revealed would increase, but the results would be too ambiguous if they got too anxious.

Kusla stared at their schedule, hoping to come up with a plan that would incorporate those considerations.

As he looked on at the processes Kusla had written out, Wayland suddenly said,

"This sure brings back memories."

"Ah?"

"I remember that time when we're planning to poison that damned master~"

Kusla stared back at Wayland, and grimaced,

"But we're caught in the end back that. We're unlucky."

"No no, I think that was the time we learnt about the concept of falling short of success, right~?"

"How optimistic of you."

"I'll like to say that's making active use of past experience."

Kusla shrugged, "Think, or else we're going to have a repeat of that again." but the moment he said that,

Both of them straightened their necks in unison, like birds in the hills and dales.

"Hm?"

Kusla stared at Wayland, who in turn stared at the ceiling.

There was a light tapping from the roof.

Was it a bird? A rat?

Just when they were wondering, there was the sound of wood being knocked at.

"Above...isn't that the door~?"

"A guest? At this hour?"

The city had already closed long ago, and at this time, it would be hard to imagine many people moving outside during the dark.

But they then clearly heard a knock again.

"I'll go."

Kusla got up and gave Wayland a look, who then proceeded to get up too. He extinguished the light, bent his back, and walked towards the water wheel.

Thomas was killed in this town, and Thomas had told the two of this,

That they were to protect themselves with assassination and poison.

He held the shortsword on his waist as he proceeded up the stairs slowly. The knocking on the door got stronger, and irregular in intervals.

"?"

Why is there such a eccentric assassin? Kusla wondered, and at the same time, the knocking ceased. Due to the unexpected silence, he held his breath.

But unexpectedly, at the next moment, there was a sound at the door.

"Ac...hoo..."

If that was an assassin, it certainly was impressive acting on his part. Kusla however let go of the hand at the shortsword hilt, took large strides to the door, unlocked the door from the inside, and swung the door outwards. Thereafter, he found Fenesis seated at the door, her back leaning against the wall, fixed in a strange position.

"You forgot something?"

Though he asked this, Fenesis did not look like she returned to get something back, for she was carrying a baggage.

"Erm, well..."

A young lady was standing in front of a house, holding a baggage under the shroud of night.

No matter what apparent intention Fenesis had for arriving here, there was no way Kusla could force her to return.

Once the door was shut, Fenesis sat down on the chair, and said,

"I still have not found anything, so you people might be doing something immoral at night...so"

"That's why you're stopping by?"

"...Yes."

Upon seeing Kusla let out a sigh, Fenesis looked fairly insecure.

There were some reasons involved for this sigh.

However, the biggest reason why that Fenesis, on her superior's orders, came to a workshop with only male adults working inside on the latter's command. He had once clearly told her not to trust her superior and run away from the tasks given to her if she did not like it, but it could be said that she still wanted to gain recognition.

This only made her look more foolish as a result.

"You don't know what might happen to you."

"!..."

Fenesis gasped, and after a pause, stared at Kusla with upturned eyes, and said,

"Maybe you...can be trusted here..."

"So is that the only thing you can trust us for...?"

Kusla gave a wry smile, but in fact, Fenesis practically never doubted anything Kusla had said. She was a girl who was so naive that she would inadvertently trust another person even though she wanted to trust.

And Kusla felt furious that this whilst he had no ulterior motives on her, this toy made for enjoyment could have been manipulated by someone else.

"Then again, if I chase you back, you've nowhere else to go to, right?"

Fenesis lowered her head and nodded. If she were to return to her superior's residence, all that awaited her was punishment, and she had no acquaintances in town.

Kusla again let out a sigh, and called out downstairs.

"WAYLAND!"

What!? The reply could be heard immediately, and Kusla said.

"We have an innocent maiden staying with us here! Stay downstairs at all time!"

There was a long pause after Kusla's words, *that's mean~!* and then, these words were heard.

But that was not a joke either. Wayland had a habit of loving anyone he liked. It could be said that his hand inadvertently would reach out and do something.

Upon thinking about this, Kusla felt unexpectedly worried for some reason.

This was more or less an odd desire to protect her surging within him, and yet also like a form of possessing her.

He inadvertently felt shocked by how he was at this point.

"Now you can relax at least. At least you won't have two big men attacking you at night."

It seemed there was no need to threaten her, for once those words were thrown at her, her eyes widened.

She was already mentally prepared for anything bad that might happen.

She came to this workshop because of an order, ostensibly trying to please her superior. Or perhaps she was trying to gain Kusla's group recognition and live as their friend.

"You're an idiot like us here."

In response to Kusla's words, Fenesis merely lowered her head, and did not argue back.

Act 5

It was already the time when vegetation laid asleep when Kusla slowly walked up the stairs and returned to the bedroom, trudging his tipsy legs. After letting Fenesis sleep in the bedroom on the first floor, he had been discussing with Wayland in front of the furnace, at the bottom of the workshop.

They had met the worst form of interference in the worst possible moment. It was really impossible to think Post would have leaked some information to the Prayer people, so they would have view it as a coincidence.

But it was because of this reason that there was something troubling. If she had come with malice, there was still room for negotiation. The Prayer Group must have been feeling anxious, as they were unable to grasp where Thomas left his records. If they wanted to use more violent means, there was a huge lump called Post in the way, but there was no decisive information for them to use such forceful means. If they were to attack the workshop through brute force, and not gain anything as a result, who knew what sort of retaliation would happen to them.

Even so, Kusla's group only had the duplicates of the 2 parchments Thomas left behind. If they did not experiment in refining pyrite, there was no way they could decipher it, and unable to know what vile act did Thomas do exactly.

And so, just when they decided to experiment in the night, Fenesis came.

If they were to use the water wheel to move the vents, they would certainly be noticed.

There was a limit to how much they could hide, for since she foolhardily described how happy she was when distilling zinc and got scolded for it, it seemed she would directly report this as well.

Of course, if they wanted to continue Thomas' experiments, there was also the option of waiting for it to cool.

But Kusla's group knew that Post might be the reason for their downfall, for he might be viewing them as an eyesore. Though he might not send in assassins to kill them like what the Choir would do, but he would distance himself from this workshop.

In that case, there would be no guarantee the duplicates could be safely transferred out. Considering Post's extremely prudent personality, there was no way they could underestimate this possibility.

And this was ever so constant in this situation.

Because of this, Kusla and Wayland were racking their heads.

Thomas' great accomplishment could not be hidden in the darkness of history because of a trivial reason like defying against religious belief.

Let alone be buried by a model student-like decision, to take care of the other alchemists.

If that pure iron was Thomas' Magdala...

Upon thinking about this, Kusla's group felt that they could not allow this to happen.

It did not matter even if nobody else cared about it; the pride of an Alchemist demanded different.

Then, there was only one choice left.

The option to recreate Thomas' metallurgical records no longer existed, but Post's placation was an immunity for them. In that case, Fenesis...

Wayland must have seen this only path left as he glanced aside at Kusla, and suddenly said.

—Let's do it when it's time~ It's the best method to shut someone up.

Kusla knew he would have come to this conclusion soon, and took the wine.

—Since she's so lonely, you might as well do it rather than let her continue on like this~.

Wayland had said this with a frivolous tone.

Do you want me to take over? It was probably Wayland's expression of concern that he did not say this, but he certainly was sharp enough to immediately sense that Kusla was especially concerned about Fenesis.

But once he got out of the living room and opened the door leading to the bedroom, his frown intensified.

He had already told Fenesis to go to sleep, but the latter was curled at the wall, ostensibly stating that this was how she had lived up till this point, that it was something she was most accustomed to.

However, the weather was excessively frigid, and nobody, other than the travelers used to such conditions, could sleep on such a cold floor. In fact, one could tell Fenesis' body was trembling cold even in the darkness.

He returned to the living room, boiled some water, lit a candle, and returned to the bedroom.

"You'll catch a cold."

Fenesis lifted her head in the face of such words, her body all unable to move as it was ostensibly frozen solid.

Both of them had their backs leaning on the bedroom wall as they remained under the blanket.

The reason why they did so was because the wall was connected to the furnace shaft, which made the wall warm. The reason why they were under a blanket was because Fenesis was trembling so hard she resembled a victim caught in an avalanche.

And as Kusla had just drunk some liquor, he was worried that something bad would happen. Thus, he brewed some tea

After a little while, with the help of the blanket, warm wall, and tea, there was some snorting from the nose, which had warmed up like melted ice.

"Have you calmed down a little?"

Kusla nodded away, ostensibly talking to himself, and sighed forlornly,

"At least take care of yourself a little, okay?"

There were all sorts of hidden meanings in these words, but Fenesis did not answer immediately.

The answer that finally came however was as such,

"I don't want to hear that from you."

In fact, nobody would want to hear this from an Alchemist devoting his entire life into Magdala.

"Well, since you've calmed down now, can you please sleep over there now?"

Kusla pointed at the bed, and Fenesis followed his line of sight, before lowering her head dejectedly.

"Relax, I'll sleep downstairs."

"Eh?"

"There's still heat from the furnace. It's a lot warmer downstairs, as long as I endure Wayland's snoring."

This was not a lie.

However, Fenesis, who lifted her face at Kusla, still looked away in the end and lowered her head. Kusla then said with a teasing tone,

"Or is it that you want to sleep together?"

Once he placed the hand on the shoulder, her petite body cringed.

Any form of food, when heated, would soften and let out an aroma. Fenesis' body had loosened a lot as compared to when she was frozen solid a little while ago, and there was a sweet aroma from nowhere. Most probably, her body was probably covered with the Frankincense the Clergymen had used for prayer.

"..."

Fenesis kept her head lowered, and did not answer.

Kusla was flabbergasted.

"So I'll take this as a yes?"

Fenesis then brought her small mouth to him, and his smile froze.

Hesitation?

No, this isn't it. Kusla thought.

Had she given up? Is she confused? She ostensibly had all sorts of other emotions, and yet did not seem to have any; it was an expression seemingly filled of emotions, and seemingly devoid of emotions.

Fenesis had already made up her mind, unlike the perplexed Kusla.

He instinctively withdrew his hand from the chin, and slowly lowered his chin.

And then, **Kok**, her cheek was resting on his shoulder.

"Why must you go to that extent...?"

"...I've told you the reason before."

Fenesis said as she leaned her body towards him like a lover.

But the way she answered, her breathing, her lifeless movement resembled more like a corpse whose heart had just stopped beating.

"Did they tell you that since nothing is clear yet, they want us to commit a sin even if it means offering your own body?"

"..."

Actually, Kusla did not know whether they had said it to such an extent.

However, one could imagine the exasperated superiors actually thinking it did not matter to them even if it came down to this. It was akin to a Badger Game; doing anything to a Sister alone would be deemed a sin in this world. After which, they would thoroughly investigate the workshop and achieve their aim.

However, they had already sent a girl to a workshop with two men working there.

As expected, Fenesis did not respond to Kusla's words. Her petite body and head probably had yet to comprehend what she was doing at this point after all.

She came by because she was told to 'go', told to do this for she was told to 'do'

Kusla retracted his hand that was placed on Fenesi's shoulder.

But at that exact moment, Fenesi's hand grabbed onto his.

"What about you? I heard your list was killed by the Knights."

It was ostensibly a voice heard from the grave when burying a body in a cemetery.

Kusla however let out a smile.

"Why are you able to remain so calm?"

"I said it before, didn't I?"

"So that you can go to Magdala?"

"Yeah."

"But I..."

Fenesi lifted her head as she muttered,

Her face, shrouded in darkness, was ostensibly a corpse sullied by the dirt in the grave.

"But I cannot imagine why you are able to remain so calm."

Kusla state at those eyes seemingly yearning for separation, and looked aside slightly. This was not uncommon, and certainly not the first time he was seeing someone face his doom. Life and death was simply just an issue is whether the heart remained breathing or not. There were many various ways to die.

For example, an Alchemist giving up his quest for Magdala, or a Sister selling her own body.

Thus, Kusla said as if he was saying a farewell speech,

"It's iron."

"... Iron?"

"Of course, I'm not talking about the ordinary kind. Actually, I do really think of it as some joke."

"..."

Kusla finally let out a wry smile as he shrugged, and Fenesi confined to state at him intently.

She again brought her cheek to his shoulder, like a love couple sharing their pillow talk.

Of course, just as how Kusla felt a sense of familiarity from seeing Fenesi's reliance on the Choir, so the later might have the same feelings.

"Don't laugh when you hear this."

Thus, Kusla tried his best to talk with a candid tone as he said half-jokingly.

With her face leaning on his shoulder, Fenesi continued to look at the front, and she quietly said,

"Depends on what it is."

"Orichalcum."

Kusla said this without hesitation, and sounded a little shrill, for the more important the term was, the harder it would be to say it.

"The metal of dreams, or divinity. The legendary metal that was said to have vanished along with a lost continent, called Orichalcum. It is a legend akin to fables of knights defeating dragons that the young dream of."

Kusla had decided that no matter what Fenesis replied, he would remain silent all the same.

For this was a forbidden dream even for an Alchemist. No, it was precisely because he was an Alchemist that it was forbidden.

Was this something one thinks is worth risking his life on?

For this was a dreamy statement any adult with a mind would widen his eyes and shake his head at.

"In its pure state, it is said to let out a ring truer than gold when struck. The ringing of pure gold is something inexplicable, something that won't fade away after a long time. The ring from Orichalcum seems like it'll vibrate together, that the crystals will melt away. It has a dull color, and only a large mineral shows a little hue."

Fenesis continued to listen without saying anything, her body remaining unmoved.

What is inexplicable about Orichalcum is that it is as soft as Willow, but sturdier than any metal. It won't bend or break, and the Ancient War Hero Aldegros was completely unscathed when he cut through the land with the blade of Orichalcum, and managed to perfectly sheath it back. I..."

The hand held by Fenesis twitched slightly, and grabbed the hand grabbing it.

It was an utterly ridiculous topic, but he did not want it to be deemed as a lie or to befuddle others. For some reason, Kusla suddenly had a notion, that if the person holding his hand were to say it, it would sound realistic and honest.

"I want to create Orichalcum.

"Why?"

Fenesis spoke for the first time

What followed was a world where he could speak his true thoughts, without hiding anything, and he cringed slightly.

But he was holding Fenesis' hand, and the latter was not holding his.

He wanted to convey something through this hand.

"I want to use it to create a sword."

She lifted her face at him.

"For what reason?"

Her eyes resembled those of a cat's, extremely clear as it strolled under the moonlight.

He suddenly had an excuse to explain himself, that it would be fine to reveal his thoughts to this witch's Familiar of a cat.

"Because i just can't forget the Epic i heard when i was young."

"..."

"I want to use the legendary blade of Orichalcum to fight, just like those common tales."

Fenesis remained silent, showing a slight smile.

She seemingly found someone similar to herself.

When a person bet everything for something, he seemed a babbling fool to a bystander.

Fenesis blinked slightly, and whispered,

"Then...it will become that sort of adventure story where you beat the monsters in legends?"

"That's still good if it's the case, but that's not it. When I was serving my apprenticeship, I said this to Wayland before, got laughed at, and we ended up beating each other."

Fenesis glanced aside, and said,

"I cannot imagine what kind of metal it is."

Kusla shrugged, chuckled, and said with a sigh,

"It's like fighting to protect a Princess. If it's a legendary sword and a brave Knight, a Princess comes right after, right?"

She did not know whether to laugh or be impressed by him, but her flabbergasted human expression was certainly unique.

However, Kusla felt a lot more relaxed when seeing her face.

The reason why he had this dream was that he witnessed his village get burned to the ground. The girl he was holding hands with a day ago when they went for the hill later became a casualty of arrows.

He only had a belief in his heart, to get the power to protect everything.

But in this world, where one's personal strength was vastly helpless in this world, just thinking about it alone was an utterly ridiculous notion.

But even so, Fenesis smiled with a slight bitterness.

She seemed to be implying that she was the same.

"But that Land of Magdala really doesn't exist."

"Eh?"

"I don't know exactly how much you heard about us...but it's probably not off the mark. My lover was killed in the previous town I was in, during that little time I went off to get some wine. I felt that it was fine if we could chat, no, if she could just be with me. It was late at night; I wanted some honeydip wine before bed, and went out to get enough wine for two. I still remember the smile I last saw on Friche when I walked out of the room, and when I returned, I found her totally butchered like a pig."

It was not a simile.

Spies would typically hide a secret in a certain part of their bodies. They were Stalwarts, hiding their secrets in their gut, intestines, or even their flesh, and sew it up in practically every single part of their body.

At that time, Kusla stood at the door, drinking away as he watched the 'Masterpiece' on the floor.

"What I thought that time was not sadness or anything like that, but that how white her dissected ribs were. A human's bones were whiter than anything else. Didn't I say that we use shells when refining metal? We do metal use of human bones too. And so, I felt that if we had to do this, what if I use a Saint's bones instead of an ordinary person's?"

Fenesis listened to Kusla slightly, her expression not changing at all.

"Those people from the Knights thought that I was just an emotional wreck back then, but that was not the case. My mind was simply thinking of metallurgy, the only thought I had in my mind. My lover was butchered in front of my eyes, I had a dream to protect a Princess, but yet I could only think of metallurgy when I saw the Princess get murdered. To me, the Land of Magdala is simply a mirage."

Kusla's master had christened him as Kusla for how inhuman he was, and Wayland had compared him to a clock that continued to tick.

Kusla too was aware about this, but did not understand why he was still passionately chasing after the Land of Magdala.

That was why he felt he was a fool, that he could not stop despite knowing this, that he was the same as those who indulged in alcohol and gambling. His faults would probably persist till the end, or that he could persist on till this point for he knew he was such a fool. It was a feeling of dealing with things when they came.

Alchemists all had such a feeling, probably because they all had this something in their hearts/ *You are a fool*, they would think, but would respect the Magdala others had, for they understood the pain each person had. Kusla felt this was the reason why Thomas' metallurgical records should never see the light of day.

Thus, when he heard those words from Fenesis, all he could show was a smile completely beyond fury.

"That is amazing."

There was merely a pitying expression.

Was she trying to say he was incorrigibly beyond hope?

That was what Kusla personally thought too.

But there were some words he could not pretend not to hear.

"You really are faithful to your dream."

"..."

Fenesis' chest was grabbed at tightly.

This action was near instantaneous, so this, and what happened afterwards, happened in a split instance.

But because it happened in an instant, he noticed Fenesis' expression.

He grabbed her by her clothes, but she did not show any surprise or fear.

It was a calm smile, a relaxing one.

"Are you making a mockery of me?"

A fool who had a nonexistent place as a goal.

Kusla continued to stare at Fenesis intently.

But the latter stared back at Kusla, showing a troubled smile.

"Why would I?"

"Then—"

"I am relieved."

She let out a mutter.

"I am very, very relieved that you are a true Alchemist."

Kusla did not talk back, for he did not understand what Fenesis said at all.

And more perplexing was why she could remain so calm.

She placed her hand on Kusla's hand that was grabbing onto her chest.

It was cold.

Kusla did not think of letting go of the hand grabbing onto the chest.

It seemed there was a huge misunderstanding.

"I do find what happened in the previous town a mishap, but I find if it is you, you will definitely become a Knight who can protect a Princess well."

He should be angry here.

That was what Kusla told himself, but his body did not move.

Perhaps he was subconsciously expectant of the words that were to follow.

"Even when the person important to you was in such a devastated state, you were not confused, thinking about how to create a sword to protect her. You really are loyal to your own dream."

"..."

Fenesis let out a wry smile.

That was the expression of a girl who just heard someone brag about his lover.

"That person, Friche, you must have really loved her, right? That is why you thought about metallurgy, that if only you had a sword of Orichalcum, right?"

Kusla felt his heart being shaken at its core.

He had difficulty breathing, he felt his nose was about to bleed, and he instinctively brought his face to his hands.

He was shaken.

No.

He was suddenly overcome with sadness.

The slighted truth changed everything.

Kusla witnessed the memory of lead become that of gold.

At that time, he was not a cold-blooded man thinking about metallurgy, but thinking of how he should have protected her. The fact was he was feeling sadness, confused, but they were cast behind, that he should have gotten Orichalcum, which would have protected someone important, like Friche. He was merely troubled by his own rational thoughts.

It was not that he did not value others.

But that he did not notice.

"That is why I am relieved."

Kusla was ostensibly swimming in the torrent of emotions, and yet wading in reality because of Fenesis' words.

His mind was only filled with confusion.

Why would Fenesis smile like she was relieved? What in his words caused her to feel this way? Or was Fenesis really such a gentle Sister?

But more than that, there was the instinct of an Alchemist whispering at his ear. Was he not notified of something important? Like some magic ingredient he did not know of into the cauldron of metallurgy, turning lead into gold.

And why exactly did Fenesis come here?

She definitely was not here to heal Kusla's emotional wound.

Or rather, perhaps she came here, seeking death?

"You and I are equal. There is no reason now to hesitate, is there?"

"..."

Fenesis grabbed Kusla's hand.

The retracting hand was stopped.

Kusla, in his attempt to flee, was caught.

Fenesis was the one pursuing him.

"You made a grave misunderstanding."

"You—"

"I did not come here because I was cornered, but to corner you."

"You are..."

Kusla let go of Fenesis' hand.

She, was beside him, went from being a kitten seeking warmth to a serpent seeking its prey.

"You will all become our underlings, and you shall betray your master. This is the reason why I arrived."

"Do you really think that's possible?"

Kusla placed his hand on the shortsword hilt.

Fenesis tilted her head slightly, and smiled.

"Rather than what you believe, you have already done so."

What sort of magic would be required for this?

Kusla really could not think of anything. It would be too late to use a Honeytrap tactic, and he was certainly not a fool who would be fooled at whim. Moreover, it would be all the more impossible to use violence.

Poison? Assassination? Or an ally making a hit?

None of them seemed plausible, and Kusla hesitated in his actions.

And so, in that short moment, Fenesis executed that magic clearly.

"...You...are..."

He let go of his shortsword.

Not because of the magic affecting him, but that he let go of it due to excessive shock, as the hilt in his hand slipped off the sheath.

Fenesis merely sat there.

But even so, he understood everything.

He understood once he saw Fenesis remove her veil.

She came from the Far East, from a cursed tribe, saved by the Knights, and was escorted back cautiously. However, she was placed in a monastery under the Knights' charge; a laughable story akin to a ragged doll being tossed about.

But this caused everything to come to light.

Kusla was certainly driven to despair.

What Fenesis was hiding under the veil,

Was the appearance of the Devil recorded in the Holy Manuscripts.

The most despised sin amongst the 7 Great Sins.

"If I were to call someone in here, you will be deemed a great sinner for being on the same bed as me."



Her snowy white hair was prettier than anything else.

But there was a reason why it was deemed as ugly.

There were many rumored instances of humans mating with beasts.

But there were also possibilities of that.

It seems, from the bloodlines, that such people really existed.

"My ancestors' sins, or rather, a curse."

Fenesis said with an emotionless expression as she pinched lightly at her ears.

A being not as a human, but as a beast.

"You have asked me why am I going to such an extent, and now, I can give you a proper answer. The reward for this job is to let me join the ranks of the Choir, in my state, that is."

That is. She looked really cute as she said that, tilting her head as she smiled.

But at the same time, one felt a sense of fear, for that were a near fanatical obstination in there.

"If I call in people, you have only two options. If you refuse to co-operate, you will be executed here. Either that, or you work with us."

"...You can't choose not to call people in?"

Fenesis continued to tilt her head with a smiling face.

"Or you can kill me now and escape..."

If you dare to do so, that is, if those words had been said, the shortsword in Kusla's hand would have probably flown out.

The reason why she did not do so was because she still remembered being threatened by Wayland. She was not a fanatic who did not care about her life.

Even so, her lips were shuddering slightly.

"Your dream is authentic, and I may be a fool just like you, so I guess it is fine even if my dream is gone. Of course, I have no intention dying."

She certainly was looking troubled, and there were signs of it on her smiling face.

What should I do? She was completely hapless in this aspect.

"Even if I fail here, if I am to have the same treatment, at least I..."

The smile was slowly fading from Fenesis' face.

Her face then showed no signs of emotions, and she probably felt the same as when Kusla grabbed her hand.

She then spoke softly,

"At least, I can die in the hands of the hands who welcomed me with open arms."

That was when they were refining zinc.

At that time, Fenesis was really at a loss of what to do.

And then, she grabbed his hand delightedly.

Sometimes, people could handle several cruel instances calmly if they did not know the truth.

At that time, it could not be helped that he did not know.

But at this point, Kusla knew.

He had a lot of information that would allow Fenesis to fulfill her dream. If he were to tell her that there was information of the Choir's pursuit in Thomas' Metallurgical records, her dream would be fulfilled.

But at the same time, he would be betraying Post, and many other Alchemists in the process. If he did so, his position as an Alchemist working for the Knights would no longer exist, let alone his existence on this world. If there was, he would simply be affiliated to the Choir, living on as a Clergyman or sorts.

Either way, he would have to give up on Magdala, and in that sense, he had died.

Fenesis' words were without pretense; Kusla was certainly cornered into despair.

Her existence was a sin itself, an impure existence that would cause those related to her to be deemed as Heretics, those who turned their backs on God.

It was not simply an empty term 'cursed'. Those that had interacted with her, talked with her, lived with her, would all be prosecuted by the Church without hesitation, and this was probably the same in the Far East.

Anyone who had seen her identity would only be killed, and others who had seen her could only kill her. They could only kill her and bury her. That was the only way to save the witness.

Curse.

An absolute curse.

Alchemists were at most frowned upon by others, but even so, Kusla knew how much pressure it was for an Alchemist to live on this world. If he had not joined the Knights, he would not be able to live on; this would be the same for Fenesis.

If she were persecuted by the Knights, she would be hapless.

Fenesis was the one pushing Kusla to the brink of despair, and the blanket resting on her shoulder soon slipped off, and weakly landed on the floor. Once she took off her veil, her unkempt long hair was scattered massively on the floor. Her slender shoulders matched her body, and she resembled a melting block of clay.

At this point, she looked unstable, ready to melt away and vanish without a trace.

The green eyes showed no signs of despair, for she had the pessimistic view that no matter what happened, there was nothing worse than this.

In contrast however, those eyes were looking forlorn, hapless.

She stared at Kusla.

Her eyes were ostensibly asking, *What do I do?*

Are you willing to die for me, or are you going to kill me? This was what those lethargic eyes of hers were saying.

Kusla tightened his grip on the shortsword hilt, and Fenesis sensed those movements.

Her beast ears were twitching anxiously, like a real cat.

There was no one not fearful of death, let alone the descendant of a cursed tribe.

But once the tip of Kusla's shortsword was pointed at the throat, Fenesis' lips showed a forced smile despite them still trembling.

And Kusla,

Did not swing the shortsword down.

"So it's either you die or I die, right?"

"..."

Kusla stared at the blade of the self-made shortsword he was proud of, and blew aside the dust resting on it.

"None of them look like a decent option. You really are a cursed existence."

"...But."

"Humans will die one die, so that's why we should help each other towards the Land of Magdala with all our strengths, right?"

At least that is what I think, Kusla kept his shortsword as he said.

"That's what I came here to do."

Kusla looked disinterested as he averted his eyes and kept his shortsword, while Fenesis stared at him blankly.

Even if you say so, what can you do here?

What exactly do you want to do?

An Alchemist had said this before, that it was impossible to turn lead into gold.

So what can you do at this point?

"Let me confirm something first."

"?"

"You're doing this for the first time, right?"

Fenesis first showed an expression of incomprehension, and then nodded tentatively.

"I guess so. You didn't look well-versed in this, it was too forced."

She continued to give a dumbfounded look as she stared at the wry-looking Kusla.

She looked as if she just woke up in the morning, dazed looking.

"Speaking of which, how can you possibly have done such a thing after you broke down in tears when your chest got groped?"

Once she was teased, Fenesis finally showed a trace of emotion on her face.

She tugged hard at the veil in her hand, and bit her lips hard.

"Then I guess there is value in listening to me."

"What are you saying?"

"The Choir is a shady group, just as you knew."

Kusla quickly turned around, and squatted in front of Fenesis.

The latter cringed her shoulders in fear, and curled up.

Her eyes were filled with fear, and emotions.

This kitten did not want to die off so plainly, and was prepared to die just so she could live.

"In other words, there's not only the options of me dying or me killing you."

"Eh?"

"There's a high chance of you being killed by the Choir."

"Ehh??"

Kusla lifted his head, and looked towards the door.

The layout of this workshop was carefully planned, as one would expect of the highly skilled Alchemist Thomas.

No matter who attacked here, they would have to come from the door, through the widest path.

"This is the usual way of dealing with heretics."

"...Heretics?"

"Right. The ones most suited for determining heretics are heretics themselves. Do you know why?"

She immediately pondered instinctively.

She really was an honest child.

Kusla chuckled, his nose ostensibly itching.

"Those who are heretics will understand the methods heretics use very well. But the biggest reason is that these heretics, in an attempt to prove that they are no longer heretics, will work harder than anyone else."

"!"

Fenesis' body froze, ostensibly unable to breathe.

Kusla twisted some of Fenesis' white hair, and let it down again.

Normally, nobody, upon picking up this silk-like hair, would think that it was part of the body.

"If they had compassion upon seeing the enemy, they'll be treated as the enemy's comrades. If the enemy escapes, they'll be suspected of letting them escape, and chase them till the ends of the world. If they refuse the order, they would be deemed as traitors, even if they were pretending to be heretics in a heretical organization."

Fenesis continued to stare at Kusla without blinking as the latter continued.

Kusla did not look at her.

But he placed the blanket that had slipped off Fenesis back onto the shoulder.

"And in the end, they'll send the hunting dogs into the old nests of the heretics, take the initiative to capture them all, and get their comrades recognition, making them think 'I'm no longer a heretic, right?'"

Kusla smirked, and finally met Fenesis in the eyes.

The latter had such beautiful eyes.

"However, what will strike them from the back will be the fangs of the hunting dogs they thought are their allies. Why? How can that happen? When they're about to die, one of the hunting dogs will say, 'Right, now all the heretics are dealt with, **all, of, them.**'"—

This was the truth.

A cloth dyed black would never be turned white again.

Fenesis merely grabbed Kusla's hand as the latter was about to reach for the blanket on her chest, and cover it over her.

"Th-that is..."

"It really happens. I know you don't really want to believe it either."

The way Kusla responded and grabbed her hands was such that they seemed to be in a dance, their palms meeting each other.

"There's nothing decent in the world. I guess you're told what signal you're supposed to release, right? There'll be people coming in from the empty house opposite, you'll be stabbed through along with me, they'll slowly move our dead bodies together to look like we're have intercourse, and use that as solid proof."

It was unknown if it was this vulgar usage of terms that caused her to frown, or if it was something else.

But she turned her face aside, and wanted to move her hands away from Kusla.

"I'm saying this is just a possibility."

"..."

"You're just searching for your own Magdala, or rather, I'm searching for mine."

"But you didn't kill me."

"Of course. There's still a third option, so why must I kill?"

Fenesis gave up on letting go of the hand, and held onto his hand tightly.

She tentatively leaned her body over, ostensibly trying to hide her pretty face from below.

There was nothing for her to stake her courage on.

A reason to run away, for she had something to protect.

"I guess your Magdala might be in the same place as mine."

"Huh?"

"Come to my side."

The reason why Kusla grinned was that, had he had not invited her in such a callous manner, he would have felt embarrassed.

"Come to this side, or will it be better for you to stay with the sinister Choir?"

"Ah...uu, but..."

"And we can go look for my Magdala together."

Kusla let go of the hand, and proceeded to embrace her.

Her petite, slender body felt ready to snap if he had exerted just a little strength.

"I said before that I don't hate a troubled Maiden, didn't I?"

Fenesis, upon hearing Kusla's whisper, squirmed while ostensibly trying to break away from his arms as she looked up at him.

Her face looked as if she was ready to cry anytime, utterly filled with confusion.

"Y-Yo-You, wh..."

"It's fine even if you think I'm lying to you, but I didn't kill you, and also..."

He said as he brought his nose to her neck, sniffing at it without much concern.

It was a sweet scent, numbing a nose that had been used to sulfur and ash.

"It seems I do truly love someone, and you're the one who taught me that. Take responsibility for that."

"Ah...erm...hii!"

After a kiss on the collarbone, her body jumped up.

She was a little girl who would get furious after a little teasing, and that nobody would get bored of.

"And also, my name is Kusla, so once I decide on something, I won't take it back."

"Ah..."

A thoroughly blushing Fenesis finally used both hands to push at Kusla's face and separate them.

This would probably happen if he was hugging a real cat. He found this really amusing.

"You are...the worst!"

"I'm already used to hearing that from you. At least it's better than hearing it from Wayland though."

"..."

Fenesis gave a confused expression, a mix of whether to be surprised or furious as she adjusted her clothing.

The reproaching look on her face did not seem to be merely targeted at Kusla's prank only.

"If what you said is true..."

"Everything I said is true."

"But even if it is, what do you intend to do? Maybe I did come here seeking death, but even you cannot possibly escape unscathed."

"I can just run away."

But Fenesis, who had nowhere to go, spoke with her voice cracking,

"To where?"

"That's why I'm asking you to come to our side, no?"

After giving a startled expression, she groaned,

"I will be killed."

"By who?"

"Alan Post."

Do you even have to say this? Her expression was practically screaming that.

Kusla was slightly taken aback by that serious expression, and reached his hand over, ostensibly wanting to comfort her.

"Calm down. What benefit will Post have if he kills you? Though you're a curse-like existence, but curses are only scattered around by those who use them. The Choir's the ones who sent you, so once you escape to the Baggage Corps, they'll have to ignore you. If they start a commotion, they'll be deemed as heretics, and the Baggage Corps have a reason to keep you alive. You are a card that can be used to hold off the Choir, and they'll definitely protect you with all they have. That old man's in his own territory, and he doesn't care about any belief or anything as long as he's not being intruded on. He'll definitely..."

"That's why I'll be killed."

Kusla had no idea as to why Fenesis was so furious.

What was so terrifying?

Kusla tried his best to deny this thought. He could firmly believe it, rather than feel a mere terror from it.

Once he noticed something, there was a shudder in his heart.

"You know something I don't, do you?"

He stared at Fenesis, and the latter stopped her movements.

And then, she groaned softly and slowly, ostensibly facing an unpredictable wild beast,

"You probably...do not know anything."

"There's the possibility of you being fooled. Don't be angry now. Tell me why Post wants to kill you."

Fenesis, who was like a dead person obsessed with living just a while ago, reverted back to being that easily teased girl.

The only thing different however was that her eyes were half-opened as she stared at Kusla, looking a little shy.

"Post is the mastermind behind all this."

"...What?"

"He was the one who ordered Mr Thomas Blanket's death."

That Post, who was unfazed by other religions, who managed the town substantively, who insisted on protecting the Alchemists for the sake of the Knights,

Post was the one who killed Thomas?

A denial appeared in Kusla's heart.

There was no reason for him to kill Thomas, for the latter and the other Alchemists were the most important existences to them. They, if measured in monetary values, It would be a staggering fortune.

"Let me confirm something."

"What is it?"

Kusla stared at Fenesis' eyes, and as expected, her eyes were still narrowed.

He felt that was similar to looking at a cat directly in the eyes.

But she did not turn her head around.

This would be the crucial moment to see what was boiling in the cauldron of alchemy.

"Why exactly did you come here?"

In the face of this question regarding the beginning, Fenesis was at a loss of words, before saying,

"To spy on Alan Post. He may have been adding to his wealth using his position through improper means."

Fenesis answered.

"Mr Thomas Blanket may have left that information, and a few days before he was killed by Post, had confessed to the people from the Choir in the town. He wanted to attain God's forgiveness for his metallurgical process."

He wanted to have God's forgiveness.

This line caused Kusla to gasp.

"In other words, Post had indecent objectives in using the Alchemists, and Thomas the accomplice was guilty-stricken by this?"

"Or maybe Mr Thomas discovered some misconduct, and before he was dragged to the stake, he wanted..."

But Post realized this beforehand, and Thomas was eliminated first.

It made sense somewhat.

But in that case, there was a problem.

"Then why did they take such a drastic measure? Why did they chase you out?"

Fenesis was requested to investigate Post, but that alone was not enough to justify her behavior. It was a case of overreacting, using her just to achieve this aim.

But Fenesis looked dejected.

The expression was akin to that of an inquisitor.

Just confess already. Or you are going to Hell. That expression was basically crying this.

"For you have given the information Thomas left behind to Post. No, it was pointless even if you had hidden it. My curse is very effective."

Kusla looked up at the ears.

He recalled what happened in the morning, where she was sitting in the courtyard back then.

A human's ears could not hear, but what about beast-shaped ears?

He looked as if he had dug his own grave, once he realized that when he was confessing his true thoughts after getting drunk, Fenesis was with him.

"Even if I complete this job, there is a possibility that I will be killed...I guess. But even if I escape to Post, I will be killed there. I do not think they will leave me alive just to hold them off."

They would kill Fenesis, and then use her to extort goods the Choir; Kusla's group would naturally be killed too, for they knew about this.

Logically, this was very plausible.

"So...therefore...if we can live on..."

Kusla used his hand to stop Fenesis from muttering to herself any further.

What she said was valid.

But Post's words could be extremely valid as well.

"Unfortunately, our side's explanation is valid too."

"...Eh?"

"You're an advanced scout used to track the Alchemists, and Thomas' metallurgical records can be used for this."

"..."

In that case, I can understand very well why you're forced to use such drastic measures. To them, you just just a simple tool to purge us Alchemists, to curse us and bring us to the stake."

The reason why Fenesis did not speak up was simply because she did not manage to keep up.

But there was no time to explain to her.

Both sides had different reasonings, but they were both valid.

It was not out of mere coincidence that this could happen.

Then, there had to be a lie hidden in this, an ingenious one at that.

Which side was it?

Both the Alchemists and Fenesis were existences that could not live once they leave the Knights' protection.

If they want to continue living on peacefully, they would have to seek protection.

And at this moment, once they choose the wrong side, someone would die, or worse, both sides would.

Whether to choose the Choir, or the Baggage Corps.

What exactly did Thomas know? What sort of information did he leave behind?

God's Forgiveness.

What did this line mean exactly?

"Either way, it's too dangerous for one person to decide."

"Eh?"

"Let's go down. No matter whether we have hope or not, let's at least endure through this together."

Kusla held Fenesis by the hand and stood up.

But no matter how he tugged at her, she just would not move, and she even instinctively withdrew her hand from Kusla.

"What is it?"

She placed her hands in front of her chest, ostensibly instinctively protecting them, as they had been held earlier. She was staring at Kusla timidly, but could not continue.

"If you aren't going to follow me, I'll really find it a pity."

Fenesis again stood at the crossroads.

But as he continued to pull her while she remained seated, he thought,

Is there anyone else on this world more worthy of being protected?

This girl bore an absolute cursed fate, and though the beast ears looked that intriguing, but after seeing the strange symbols on the constellations, he found those ears a little cute.

And more importantly, he firmly believed that if there was a sword of Orichalcum along with her, there would be nothing more perfect than that.

"Come here."

Kusla reached his hand out, but the latter winced as she looked down.

He stopped his hand that was reached out, and sighed.

"Too bad."

Truly.

The instant he was about to say this, Fenesis raised her veil, and said,

"P-Please do not touch me."

Such a noble Princess.

Kusla nearly bared his teeth as he laughed, but she was rather serious.

She fidgeted about as she put on her veil, and stood up.

"Let's hurry. Your superiors must've been waiting for quite a while."

Fenesis nodded, and followed Kusla out of the room. Just when she was about to head downstairs however, she stopped.

"What is it?"

"Well...my luggage."

"We may die because of that delay though."

Kusla said, but Fenesis was already running off.

This was not a joke; if someone were to lie, it would mean they had to move quickly.

And Post certainly would have known that Fenesis was at the workshop in the middle of the night.

In that case, there would truly be no time to hesitate.

Once they get killed by an incoming group, they would not have a chance to think of anything.

With an anxious heart, he returned to the bedroom.

He saw Fenesis holding her luggage in her left hand, and something strange on her right.

"I'll buy as many as you need of that when you want next time. Hurry."

Fenesis lowered her head with an angry look on her face, and scampered behind with her head tucked in.

She was holding a silver Holy Mother statuette.

"...But..."

And she muttered something.

"Huh?"

Kusla asked as they hurried down the stairs, and Fenesis was momentarily at a loss of words, before she suddenly changed her tone and said,

"This is the first time I received something from someone else."

Kusla inadvertently stopped in his tracks and started at Fenesis in surprise. She was biting her lips and looking aside, probably shy or soemthing.

I guess she's doing this on purpose. He wondered.

He did not feel at ease upon knowing that she treasured something he randomly picked for her carelessly.

"This."

"Eh...ah!"

"Actually, this really isn't for you."

"Eh?"

Kusla swiped the statuette from Fenesis' hands, and then proceeded to play with it in his hands.

"I actually intended to use it as extra money afterwards."

If one were to think about it, this was also a misconduct of hoarding money

If what the Choir said was correct, perhaps this was a more severe sin. Kusla grimaced as his lips curled upwards, while Fenesis snatched the statuette from his hands.

"There will be Divine Retribution if you put the Mother into the fire!"

And then, she started rubbing the Mother statuette with her robes.

Kusla states at her blankly, and it was not because that silver would remain this dull no matter how she rubbed.

But because of something basic.

Will putting the Holy Mother statuette into the fire really warrant Divine Punishment?

Kuala widened his eyes, and again snatched the statuette away from her arms. He ignored her priests behind him as he hurried down the stairs.

He arrived at the second basement, and Wayland, who was awakened by the footsteps, was showing a displeased look after being suddenly hit with a fire iron.

"What have you been doing since just now—"

"WAYLAND!!"

Kusla tossed the Mother statuette.

Wayland caught it perfectly in the darkness, and stared at it perplexedly.

"What is this. This is...pure silver? It...doesn't look like it. That's weird..."

The statuette bobbed side to side in Wayland's hands.

Kusla had firm belief that Wayland's senses were as sharp as a wild beast.

"What exactly is this?"

Wayland asked back thoughtlessly, and once he threw the Mother statuette back, Fenesis came by late, and crashed into Kusla from behind.

Just as he was about to tease her for paying so much attention to the statuette, she said with large gasps,

"There are...people up there!"

What followed was the sound of the door being broken down.

Wayland immediately raised his leg, reached his arm out to grab something, and sprinted like an escaping hare. This was probably something made of pure gold, which Thomas had left behind, and as he was used to being attacked, his first instinct would be to take all the valuable items with him.

Kusla too wanted to follow suit, but there was something more important than money.

"H-Hurry and run away. I can—"

"Shut up."

He grabbed her, cradled her in his arms while she showed a crying expression, and tucked her under his armpit.

During this time, he grabbed Thomas' metallurgical records and that Moth statuette scattered on the table.

"It's useless to run away!"

Angry growls could be heard from above.

"Th-That is right. It is all the same for me no matter where I run to."

She said as she was tucked within his arm, but this was not an expression of weakness.

For she had been attacked so many times, and her parents and tribesmen were all killed.

"The Holy Mother knows it all."

Kusla deliberately said this optimistically to calm her down.

But if looked together with that Mother statuette and Thomas' records, there seemed to be a vile presence to him.

Alchemists would give up everything for Magdala.

And those who dared to sully it were not to be forgiven.

"Like turning lead into gold."

"Eh?"

"I'm turning gold into lead this time."

Kusla murmured, ostensibly cursing as he chased up to Wayland. The latter was carrying the equipment regulating the waterwheel, and opened the dam that was obstructing the water flow.

"It's freezing."

Wayland said these words before disappearing.

Kusla walked out of the house, breathing white air, and stared at Fenessis in his hands.

"You look like a cat. Are you okay with touching water?"

"Eh?"

And Kusla did not hear her reply as he leapt into the water current flowing down the cliff.



There was something called a watershed.

With that place as the target, all blacks and white were everchanging.

The current of time was icy, cruel, more so than a water current.

Once one proceeded forward, there was no turning back, and no stopping.

Countless people would be driven by it, and even those that managed to 'swim' during their time in the current would ultimately die of weariness.

There were only a handful that could remain steadfast, tireless without sinking, and make their way to the golden ocean.

The Alchemists called that ocean Magdala.

That was the only unchanging goal amidst the countless parting decisions they made one after another.

"..."

There was only silence in that scene.

And the icy sound of water dripping.

"...You..."

What met this line that was finally eked out from the throat, was the sound of a collapse.

It was the sound of Kusla, who just got up from the water, collapsing. Post's bulging belly was preventing him from standing up.

"You're still alive...SOMEONE! HEY!"

Post called out to the other side of the door with a louder voice.

Naturally, the reason why there was still someone waiting in the office was because there was news of the commotion in the workshop.

He knew the people from the Choir would have attacked the workshop, and sent people for lookout.

"But you really managed to make it all the way here, huh...the report states that it seems the Choir's assassination squad attacked you."

The subordinates, who had hurried down from the corridor was taken aback upon seeing Kusla.

The latter was clutching at his chest, looking over with a wincing expression.

He jumped into the canal, in the midst of the frigid cold, where even the breath would turn white, ducked through a few impellers of the water wheels, escaped from his pursuers, and arrived at this place.

"Hurry up and get something to wipe the body. And get some hot wine too."

The subordinates hurriedly nod in response to Post's growl, and darted to the corridor.

Kusla continued to clutch his chest as he used his other hand to stand up.

"...What about the other two?"

"..."

Kusla shook his head.

Upon seeing this, Post frowned and shook his head.

"Damn it. How can this happen!?"

He slammed his fist on his desk. Kusla leaned his back n the wall, and faced Post whilst breathing out white smoke.

"They...were too...fast..."

"Yeah. They couldn't fight against the forces head on, and spent a large amount of money raising these despicable stealthy cads. We've been had by them, damn it!"

Post hollered for a little while, only to suddenly calm down, rub his eyes, and mutter.

"But if they're captured...this will be bad."

The Choir was aiming for Thomas' metallurgical records, and had planned to swoop the Alchemists from the Knights as well.

It would be very troublesome if both Fenesis and Wayland were caught.

"And they even set fire to the workshop. Unbelieve!"

Post spat.

Kusla widened his eyes in surprise. The workshop Thomas left behind was burned...a workshop an Alchemist had staked his life on when he built it was burned into ashes.

He shuddered, not because of the cold, but in fury.

"They couldn't find the evidence, and just burned it all to destroy it."

"Th-That's."

His body was shuddering, either due to the cold, or due to his anger, and barely gritted his teeth as he said,

"But we have an ace on our side."

"What is it?"

Post stared at Kusla.

Kusla too stared back through his dripping bangs.

"The contents of the parchment,"

"...The parchment. As in that one?"

"Yes. Regarding the one I handed to you, Your Excellency...the one we tried to recover on our side."

Post widened his mouth, and then rolled over the table.

His large hand was grabbing Kusla's shoulder, and he lifted the latter.

"Is what you said true?"

"Y-Yes."

"What is written inside? Is it something that can resist the Choir?"

He was ostensibly about to choke Kusla.

"TELL ME WHAT'S WRITTEN ON IT!"

Kusla thought about how Thomas' workshop was turned to dust, and the regret caused him to nearly break down in tears.

"I hope for God's Forgiveness. Someone is aiming to take my life. They're forcing me to confess some false crimes the Baggage Corps has done..."

"...!"

"I beg God to forgive them, forgive them for their hideous sins."

Upon hearing Kusla's words, Post turned around, and staggered backwards.

"This is what Mr Thomas left behind with all his might...he probably was being spied up before he was killed, and resisted the pressure, only to be killed in the end...Your Excellency, it is really God's protection that I sent you this parchment. Mr Thomas' journey to Magdala was..."

"...Ahh, yes."

Post stumbled backwards, took a deep breath, and stretched his back. He rushed to the wall in an unexpectedly agile motion for a man of his size.

He then opened a cabinet, and said,

"Who knows about this?"

"Me...and Wayland, if he's still alive."

"Is that so?"

Post answered briefly.

"Your Excellency, we can still make it in time however. Let's use that parchment to reveal the truth..."

"What a pity."

"...Huh?"

"It is very unfortunate, but Thomas **was** an exceptional man."

"Your Excellency?"

Kusla asked.

Post grabbed something that let out a metallic sound, and turned around.

"That parchment is no longer on this world."

"—That's what I thought."

He stabbed a fire iron into Post's hand as the latter turned around, and pressed the latter into the cabinet with excessive force.

"!?"

"The next one will hurt."

Kusla said, took out a tool hidden in his chest pocket, and slammed it on Post's leg. It was a sharp metal rod, attached with a long nail that was as thick as an adult's finger.

"!!!!!!"

"Yes. It hurts so much that you can't cry out now. However,"

Kusla then took out a hammer and smashed it into the toes of the other leg.

Post was unable to support his body, and tumbled onto the floor, his pierced arm being the only thing raised awkwardly.

"I'm furious to the point of tears!"

He threw the hammer aside, and took out the shortsword at his waist.

Some people had arrived on the corridor, and Kusla glanced at them.

These people had come all the way to this town in their mission to hunt Post down. They should have been used to bloodshed, but upon seeing such a scene, gasped. One could even see them falter.

Perhaps his expression at that point was really that terrifying.

Kusla ignored them, and turned back to Post.

"The content on Thomas's parchment was a lie. I don't know what he wrote."

"...!"

"But I can guess what it is. From that silver Mother statuette and the 'God's Forgiveness' line."

"!"

Kusla blew on the blade that was colder than the frigid night, and narrowed his eyes at it. The blurred surface quickly cleaned up; it was a fine metal, but ways to go from Orichalcum.

"You put iron in the silver Mother statuette to make up for numbers, and hoard the wealth. But you ordered them back from the market because Thomas deduced something was amiss."

Post was sweating as he panted hard, staring at Kusla, and had no intention of answering back.

Kusla looked on coldly, thinking that it did not matter.

This man had crossed countless battlefields as a member of the Knights, and finally made it to this position. It was hard to imagine he would personally speak up.

"When refining metal, we use lead to remove the impurities, but sometimes, we'll see what mineral there is, and use silver in certain situations."

Did that Thomas want to put the Mother statuettes in the fire? The silver goods were practically filled with impurities, and at this point, if the Knights had claimed it was pure silver when they sold it, they could save the hassle of refining.

But would this enrage God?

As a precaution, Thomas mentioned this to a member of the Choir, but unfortunately, Thomas learned about it. The Choir's men were secretly investigating Post, but Thomas did not know Post was using the Mother statuettes to build his wealth, and let down his guard.

In the end, he was assassinated.

He fell into a trap and was killed, just because he did not know something. This was the path Alchemists walked.

But even though they knew there was this path, they had to continue on to their goal, Magdala.

"I don't know what reasons you have for gaining such personal benefit."

Kusla whispered and shrugged.

"Everyone has his own Magdala, so I don't want to ask about why you hoarded so much money. I do find it impressive that you had the sense to push the Magdala others have into the pit without

hesitation. Even if it had been smooth sailing, I do find you really impressive after making it till this far, as a man seeking Magdala, that is."

Post's beady eyes spotted the movement of the sword being held in a reverse grip.

"So I won't tell you to die or something."

Kusla muttered.

May Your Soul Rest in Magdala.

Kusla swung the shortsword down.

—

Epilogue

The weather was clear, but a little breezy.

They stood on a cliff, where the view was exceptional, and they could spot the sea, and carelessly glanced behind at the wreckage after the fire.

"It seems most of the records aren't really burned up~. A good thing that I made an extra parchment copy that time."

As the two Alchemists, Kusla and Wayland watched on, the soldiers deployed by the town management council were doing sentry work at the workshop Thomas left behind.

Most of the construct was made of stone however, and even if there was a massive burn, it did not seem to be that serious.

Also, as Wayland had said, it seemed most of the records were not burned.

Parchment, even when tossed into the fire, would not burn easily. There were even a case when there was a massive fire in the basement of a monastery, and people still managed to salvage parchments, charred along the edges, even when the stones were melted.

"But isn't it a pity~? After putting in so much effort writing them all, it's all gone after a dip in the water."

"..."

Upon hearing this, Kusla lowered his head dejectedly.

He had Thomas' metallurgical records when he jumped into the canal, and they were all tattered because of the water. At this point, it was practically impossible to read them.

It seemed Post had dealt with the parchments, for he assumed the originals revealed his evil deeds. Because of this, Thomas' accomplishments would remain an eternal mystery.

"And then? Did the Knights headquarters do anything?"

Kusla took a step forward and kicked a piece of stone fragment as he asked.

"According to God's will."

"Huh!?"

"Because you didn't kill him, Kusla, the decision on Post and the aftermath will probably get really messy~. It seems he has given many of his assets everywhere, and I can see those guys running helter-skelter now."

Wayland cackled evilly, but Kusla did not have any interest in the hectic actions of those high up.

"But there's good news. The replacement says that he'll most probably be ordered to rebuild this worksop. And as a reward for fishing out Post, I've ordered a bunch of stuff, and he'll comply to that. Isn't that good~?"

"..."

Kusla continued forward, and Wayland caught up.

"And then?"

"Hm?"

"And then?"

Kusla repeated his question.

Wayland merely gave Kusla a blank look, and then, 'oh my', he looked up at the sk.

"Hm? What exactly?"

"Hey."

Kusla turned around to kick at Wayland, only for the latter to dodge aside happily.

The wind blew, and a cloud of dust danced about.

"Shouldn't you ask for your own share of reward yourself~?"

Wayland moved the long hair, blown upon his eyes, aside, and continued,

"That's your own Magdala, isn't it~?"

It seemed he had overheard the conversation. In the face of such meticulousness, Kusla could only sigh deep inside, and he stopped in front of the Baggage Corps headquarters.

He then cleared his throat, and said,

"If you dare do anything to her, I'll kill you."

"But what it she has already relied on me?"

Wayland retorted, and dodged another kick from Wayland.

The people beside them, living in the normal world, were passing by, completely overwhelmed by the aftermath work of Post's case and the endless daily work. They gave Kusla's group a weird look as they strutted by, but the duo did not mind as they continued on to the affiliated building located near the Headquarters courtyard.

The sentry guard, upon seeing Kusla and Wayland, knocked on the door in their place.

The skinny clergyman, who was riding on the horse that day, appeared there.

The grey eyes on his wrinkled-riddled face were showing firm conviction in his religion.

"What do you want?"

This man probably would not submit no matter how he was coerced, and would continue to live under God's teachings, even after death.

But Kusla lifted his chest and stared back in near arrogance, before saying,

"We're thinking of hiring an extra helper at our workshop."

The Land of Magdala Alchemists seek.

That was the reason why they would foolishly bet their lives.

"...Fools."

The man in Clergy robes let a path forthem.

With a Sister, who had been on standby inside, leading the way, Kusla arrived at a room.

The door was opened, and there was a bright room with its glass windows opened.

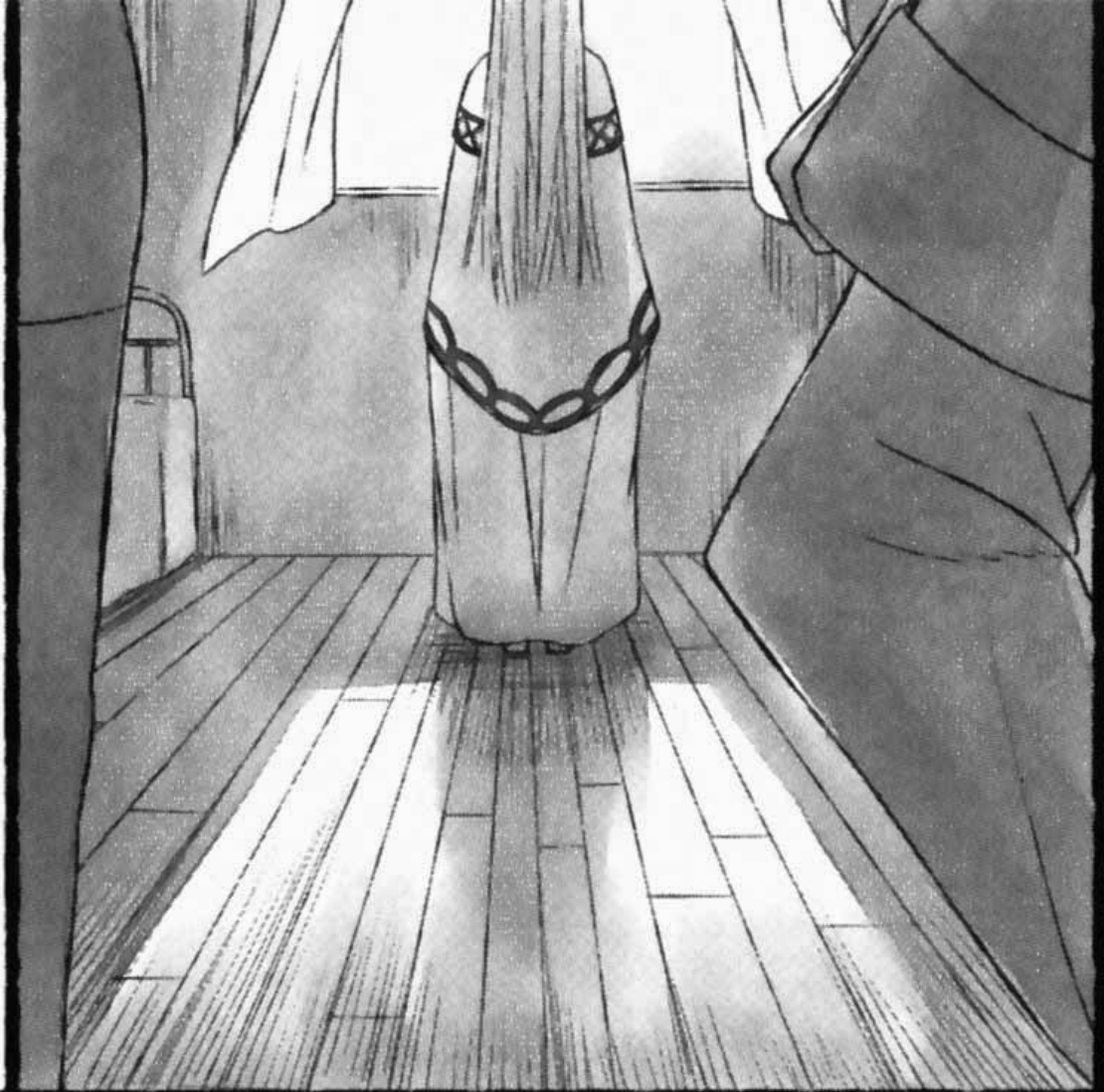
If one did not assume there was a hint in this, he would not be called an Alchemist.

Kusla reached his hand in from the door, and said,

"Let's go then."

The pure white Fenesis sighed softly in the midst of the sunlight, and grabbed that hand.

"It cannot be helped." she was ostensibly saying this.



The cursed girl and the thoroughly despised Alchemist.

It was an interlude that happened on a certain clear, breezy winter day.

Afterword

This is Isuna Hasekura, and it has been a while. A year has passed since the previous series ended, and the new series is finally released. I am sorry to keep everyone waiting.....

To those I am interacting with for the first time, please continue to take care of me.

This new series was written in the meeting room of the editorial branch for one and a half months, every single day, and it is a first time experience for me. My writing speed is only half that of my usual, but it is very difficult working every single day...I did not expect waking up punctually every single morning to be such a chore!

On a side note, the title of this series was already decided beforehand, but in my initial proposal, there were three options for the story to choose from. I felt the one most likely to succeed was a Sci-Fi brain panic story...but though this was the case, I ended up writing something else completely. This is a story about Alchemists (or something similar to them).

The previous work is set in a world similar to the Middle Ages of Europe, but there was not too much topics in regards to be refining. To be honest, I did not manage to read the research notes. This time, I had a little information, and I tried writing it because I found it interesting.

But the troubling thing was that I could not use any modern knowledge. The refined metals in the work were actually oxides, but they were being described as pure substances in the story. They most probably did not know about this point back then. There was also once when I personally saw some minerals, and found many names and colors to be different, so it was very difficult in this regards. Even though two items may be the same mineral, they may look completely different because of the impurities, so it is very surprising for me.

Also, the protagonist has been criticized by the editor-in-charge as being someone who had attained everything in life. It is true this might be the first time I have written someone with such a personality, but I really like him.

And so, I managed to write a new series while finding my way through. I hope everyone can take care of me.

Also, Mr Nabeshima is in charge of the illustrations. Despite his hectic schedule, he still accepted this job, and I am really grateful for that. In fact, it seemed he had met me when I first started out, and I gave him an autograph that time. I forgot about it completely, "It is important to remain earnest!" but this is what I feel. Haha.

Currently, I am starting to write the second volume, and I hope to do my best and deliver the book to your hands.

Then, let us meet in the next volume.

Isuna Hasekura.

Disclaimer

Under no circumstances would you be allowed to take this work for commercial activities or for personal gain. The translator does not and will not condone any activities of such, including but not limited to rent, sell, print, auction.

Credits

Author : Isuna Hasekura
Illustrator : Nabeshima Tetsuhiro
Translator : Teh_Ping
Editors: AmbientQualia, OnsenNoOsen